HELEN MATHERS' POPULAR NOVELS

The LOVELY MALINCOURT

By HELEN MATHERS
Author of "Cherry Ripe"
"Comin' thro' the Rye,"
etc., etc.

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HELEN MATHERS

This is another book from the popular pen of Helen Mathers, and is written with the same delightful charm that has brought her other books into so many homes.

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Author of

"COMIN' THRO' THE RYE"
"CHERRY RIPE!"

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CHAPTER I.

VANITY FAIR was at its height, and its chiefest mart of fashion was crowded in every part.

To and fro the people thronged, buying and selling, if only for hearts, chaffering for a smile from beauty, a bow from the great, for any and every trifle for which the world pays so high, and by which the wise set no store at all, the humbler ones fighting for a place whence they could the better view the orderly magnificence of a show not to be matched, surely, in any other capital in Europe.

Jarring notes there may be, ugly blots of colour representing those who come neither to buy nor sell, only to stare and gape at the brave men and the fair women, who seem of another race to themselves; but they cannot mar the absolute perfection of the scene, in which the faultless horses, equipages, and

servants play a brilliant and conspicuous part.

Two persons chatting together near a window in Park Lane, that overlooked Stanhope Gate had turned their backs on the tide of life flowing below; and the lady had a ruffled air, as of an orchid rudely hustled by an easterly wind, as she unfolded a letter, and regarded it with extreme disfavour before announcing its contents.

"I don't know how to tell you, I'm sure, Ronny," said Lady Appuldurcombe at last. "I know how you dislike girls, and really I never will forgive Malincourt, never!"

"Malincourt is the chap who lives in Somersetshire all the year round, and married your half-sister, isn't he?" inquired Ronny, lazily, from the depths of his big chair.

"Yes. It was the first time I ever found Cecilia's taste at fault; but I suppose if I had been born a beauty, I should have made a muddle of my life too. However, I'll read you his letter—the first I've had from him for five years, and I haven't seen him for ten.

" 'Malincourt, June 25, 1894.

" 'My dear Jane,

" 'I don't think I have troubled you much, but now I want you to do me a favour. Ask

my girl, Lesley, up to stop with you for a month; I'll warrant that four weeks of town, noticed by nobody, will break her of her tricks, and make her glad enough, after jilting half the county, to put up with Bob Heatherly'—dear me, Ronny what a name! —'the best fellow that ever breathed. She vows she won't come, but she shall, and if you will send to Waterloo to meet the 6:26 train this day week, she and her maid shall be there. You needn't bother about her clothes —she has plenty.' "—Lady Appuldurcombe groaned.—" 'Mind, I don't complain of her being too fond of the men; it's only that she encourages them to be too fond of her. And, if I make my request curtly, it is only because I know how barefaced and utterly inexcusable it is.

" 'Your affectionate brother-in-law,

" 'MALINCOURT.' "

"And it is now 6:30," exclaimed Ronny, glancing at his watch. "Mother, why didn't you tell me in time, so that I might go and meet her?"

"My boy!" exclaimed his mother, "and when I have not had you back for more than twenty-four hours! I have sent the brougham, and Parker. But how like Malin-

court to think he is punishing a girl by packing her off to taste the whipped-up cream of a London season! However, he was always mad on that point. He could stand Paris for a week, when Cecilia wanted new frocks, but nothing would persuade him to sleep a night in town; and, what was more amazing still, he persuaded my sister to think the same. She was always an extraordinarily well-turned-out woman," added Lady Appuldurcombe, meditatively, "and she died of the country, no doubt. The child was then about eight; so the girl must be that odious age to everybody but herself, eighteen. Naturally, she will be provincial to the last degree——"

"Now, mother," said Ronny, laughing, "do allow the county to have a little taste. Some of the nicest girls in the world never come to town at all, and show their sense, *I* think, by stopping away."

"Well, I can't forgive her," said Lady Appuldurcombe, crossing over to drop a loving kiss on his close-cropped, curly head; "it's too bad, after all these months of torture I've gone through, not knowing if you were alive or dead, for a silly, flirting girl to appear, and spoil everything."

"The trouble is all over now, mother," he said cheerily, "and you know I always came

back to you before didn't I? I was in hopes those confounded newspapers would have let us alone——"

"Newspapers don't spare mothers," she said; then added softly, "Cynthia was a great comfort to me; she suffered horribly——"

"Mother! I didn't ask her to do it," he burst out hotly, and got up, and stood looking across Park Lane at those geometrical masses of bloom which yearly announce the full flood-tide of that London season which rolls with muffled roar beside them.

His mother looked anxiously at him as his eyes followed the horses, not the people, though they were near enough to the park for many eyes to distinguish him upon the balcony where he stood, and more than one hand was waved to him in a greeting he did not see.

"I think I'll run down to the stables to-night," he said presently. "You are not going out, I hope?"

"I'm afraid I must. I can throw over the other things, but Green Park House is open this evening, and I must look in for an hour. If you *will* tell Charville you are out, and refuse to go to your club, or into the park, because you dread an ovation, has it not

occurred to you that, if you are the most popular man in England just now, I am the proudest mother in it to-day?"

"Oh, mother!" he said shame-facedly, for, so it is, that the men who are the very pith and marrow of English manhood, and who plant the English flag with bleeding hands, maybe, but unwaveringly, in the far corners of the earth, cannot bear to talk about it, and will run a mile rather than hear their brave deeds openly mentioned.

"And you will take that poor girl with you, of course, mother?" he added eagerly. "I want you to be nice to her"—and he looked lovingly at the tall woman, whose elegance was erroneously supposed to be in excess of her heart. "After all, what harm do you know of her? Merely that she is not as fond of the men, as the men are of her. Give her a good time, and then let her marry her own Bob Heatherly, or some one's else's Bob, and be happy."

"As if she would have a frock fit to go in!" said his mother, looking shocked. "You forget my dear, that any one under my wing is certain to be observed; and, really, I don't know how to explain it. An Appuldurcombe, a Kilmurry, and a Malincourt, all closely related; really, it hardly sounds respectable!"

Ronny's eyes twinkled. His mother knew what was coming, smiled, and beat a retreat; her prospective marriage, not his, being a standing joke between them. When she had gone, he thought how few people would have honoured the blank cheque her brother-in-law Malincourt had drawn on her kindness as she had done; but, indeed, though a woman of society, Lady Appuldurcombe was an absurd person, who could not get rid of a heart, and, if you're born so, with a hankering to do kind things, you may get rapped over your knuckles fifty times a day, but you will go on doing them simply because you cannot help it.

Looking at the shifting stream that, to him, was not even picturesque, but simply monotonous, Major Kilmurry's face fell into the stern lines of one in whom sight and thought is suddenly arrested, and action, keen, swift, and decisive, takes its place. With head thrown back, and in his nostrils the wild flicker and savour of fight, he lived once more those supreme moments that, when rightly seized, prove the hero, and pass as a national heritage into the history of that man's country.

The reality of life, not the mockery of it, had always claimed Ronald Kilmurry for its

own, and, if birth and circumstance had thrust him into the dallying ways of society, he had struck out with all the fierceness of a drowning swimmer against them, and not altogether in vain.

A man should belong to himself—and, I am afraid, Ronny would have added, his horse—he need not caper round in a self-imposed treadmill of pleasure, and spend his life in trying to convince people he loved it.

He was glad to be home. He loved his mother as it is given to but few happy mothers to be loved when a boy's earliest school-days are over, he had men friends by the score, and horses that were almost more to him than his friends, but one disagreeable fact just then stuck in his recollection, and that fact was a woman.

He would meet her to-night, of course; and —and then he turned suddenly, with an odd sense of fragrance and sunshine in the atmosphere, to see Charville retreating in the distance, and Lesley the Scapegrace standing beside him.

Oh, youth, youth! the sap in the tree, the blossom on the bough, to which unconsciously we yearn as to spring—and yet it was youth shy, and proud, and ashamed, that stood looking at Ronald, with eyes which

asked him wistfully, "Do I look such a desperate character, after all? What have I done to be thrust upon your unwilling hospitality like this?"

He laughed as he took her hand, and shook it heartily. "You are awfully welcome, Cousin Lesley," he said, seeing how, with that keenness of the senses which goes only with the morning of life, she was still examining him, hoping, but by no means sure, that she had found, not a lover, but a friend.

"Poor little soul," he said to himself, as he took a dainty bag containing purse and handkerchief from her, observing thankfully as he did so, that there was not the faintest perfume of any kind about it, for perhaps Cynthia de Salis's greatest fault in his eyes, bar one, was that delicate perfume of Parma violets by which her approach was always made known.

"Mother will be here directly," he said, "and meanwhile you must let me give you some tea," he added, as Charville himself came to wait on her, profoundly satisfied with this recruit to the "family."

But Lesley declined tea, though she looked as if she really wanted it. Ronny thought how awkward it would be if she starved herself in revenge; and, after a moment's

hesitation, told her so.

"And how would *you* like it," she flashed out, "if you were packed off like a parcel labelled 'This Side Up,' to people you had never seen, or scarcely heard of, and who didn't want to see you in the very least, but had not the courage to refuse to take you in?"

"We really ought to see something of each other, because we are cousins, you know," said Ronny, rather taken aback to find that, when she was angry, she stood nearly as tall as he did, and looked twice as game.

"Only *half*," she said, still with that insultingly tall air. Her shame seemed quite gone now.

"To be sure," said Ronny cheerfully; "but the fact is, we've got rather a way of marrying twice in our family—that why's I'm a Kilmurry. But mother draws the line at third marriages; in fact, she's awfully down on them. She thinks matrimony might become a shockingly bad habit if too long persisted in!"

"Are *you* married?" inquired Lesley.

"No one would ever undertake me," said Ronny, with unabated cheerfulness. "Too many vices, you know, and too little money."

Lesley smiled, and walked out on to the balcony, looking with interest at the park,

now just beginning to empty.

"It's almost as good as the country," she said, "only with the pulse of life beating through. It's not a bit like Dad told me—all bricks, and mortar, and blacks, and miserable people. Oh, what lovely horses!" she cried out, suddenly and joyfully, just like a little child, as Lady Appuldurcombe's voice was heard approaching from the room behind them.

Lesley turned, with a wild, startled gesture that completely disarmed her aunt—the girl was so very young to begin to be ashamed of herself—and Lady Appuldurcombe's heart relented, as she took her sister's child in her arms, and kissed as much of the extremely small face as she conveniently could.

"We are glad to see you, my dear," she said, at the same time taking in every detail of her appearance with a sense of astonishment that Ronny did not share, though he afterwards remarked that he knew Lesley's clothes must have been all right, because he did not notice them; if they had been all wrong, they would have infallibly stuck in his recollection, as most disagreeable things did.

"And how is Malincourt?" inquired Lady Appuldurcombe, presently.

"Dad is always well," said Lesley, her eyes following Ronald as he left the room. "What is his name?" she inquired, sitting down opposite her aunt.

"He is Ronny Kilmurry," said his mother, proudly, as if she had said he was the Pope.

"I like him," said Leslie calmly. "He is not handsome, but he has a kind face, and I like the way his chin curves up." She took her own small chin in her palm, and turned it up fiercely. "I wonder Dad never said anything to me about him."

"Do you never read the newspapers?" said Lady Appuldurcombe, coldly.

"Never. Dad left off reading them long ago, and I never began. You see," Lesley looked out thoughtfully at the fast thinning park, "we live in the open air, Dad and I, and we don't want to hear about things and people we are not interested in."

"And do you never read?" exclaimed her aunt, horror-struck, "or is your father the man who has a library full of books—not one of which has ever been cut?"

Lesley laughed. It was a baffling laugh, and her aunt could have boxed her ears for it. The girl got up, and moved about the beautiful saloons, expressing surprise at nothing, but pausing only to look at what

was rarest and best. She had evidently learned taste from her country surroundings.

"There are no Malincourts here," she said, as she came back slowly, and lifting her head in a way peculiar to her mother's family, who had all been swift of foot long and lithe of limb, like herself.

"And none of your mother's people are at Malincourt, I suppose?" said Lady Appuldurcombe, a little coldly. "It is a fine old place, I believe; but your father never wished to see any of us in it."

"And yet," said Lesley, in a tone of reproach, "he believes you capable of turning a silly little fool into a sensible woman! You are the only one of my mother's family he ever spoke of, ever admired. And poor mamma died so young; Dad says you were abroad with your first husband all the while she was at Malincourt."

"Poor Cecilia,' said Lady Appuldurcombe, and her heart warmed to Cecilia's child, at once so wild yet so independent, pride making her carry off a difficult position with an *aplomb,* she was far from feeling.

Lesley came over and kneeled down, and the two women looked earnestly into each other's eyes.

"I will be good," said Lesley, quite simply, but struggling to keep down the tears in her throat. "I've come to you with a bad character, I know, but I'll try hard to leave you with a clean one! I can't forgive Dad yet for humiliating me so; but probably he'll be so wretched without me, he'll send for me back before the end of the week!"

"And supposing you don't want to go?" said Lady Appuldurcombe. "That is to say, of course, if you can do without Bob."

"Oh, spare me!" cried Lesley, starting up, and putting her hands to hide cheeks upon which lay a bloom so rich, so soft, as almost to simulate art. "There is one comfort, at least, that I am rid of *him!* It's in the bond that he is not to venture near town while *I* am here."

"My dear," said her aunt, solemnly, if irrelevantly, "who makes your frocks?"

Lesley ran over a short list that made her aunt open her eyes.

"None of these people were in vogue when Cecilia died," she remarked. "Pray who has taken you in hand, and sent you to exactly the right new ones? And then your maid—she does your hair very cleverly, and in a crush, if you only take care of your head, you can safely leave Providence to look after

your skirts. But now we really must dress for dinner, and to-morrow morning you shall come to my boudoir for a chat."

When she had shown Lesley to her room—a very different Lesley to the put-in-the-corner one who had arrived an hour or two before, Lady Appuldurcombe slowly and thoughtfully, as one who revolves many things in her mind, descended the stairs in search of Ronny.

"She wears gowns made by Rouff—her hat is by Virot—and she had never even *heard* of you!" she said, sitting down helplessly, when she discovered her darling deep in a pile of racing papers, dated some months back, in the library.

"Thank God!" said Ronny. "Now, mother, didn't I always tell you what a mistake it was to read the newspapers? They were written for ghouls and cannibals, not decent people, and as to geography, especially when there is any fighting going on—why, it ought to be one of the lost arts of one's childhood. But, mother," he looked disconsolately down the column of entries he had just been scanning, "what a lot of good things I have missed by being away, to be sure!"

CHAPTER II.

The roar of conversation rose and fell like the lions' voices at feeding time in the Zoo. There were no carpets on the polished floors of Green Park House, and it was curious to note how a lull would come, in which you might almost hear a pin drop, then out would swell the raucous sounds again, though apparently the menagerie-like effect was observed by only one person present, and that was Lesley.

There was never any music here, which made the house extremely popular, the music of our own voices being so much sweeter than any other sound we ever heard, or are ever likely to hear.

"You neednt worry, mother,' said Ronny, when presently he found her looking round for Lesley, "she is going like hot cakes. The men here seem to be in the same condition as the county—one half jilted, and the other wanting to be."

And I don't know what Lesley's quality was, if she were magnetic, or only human, but when she came into a room, it seemed to grow brighter and fresher, and people began to smile after the first half-dozen words with her, and heartily to dislike leaving her company.

"She is like a glass of tip-top champagne, only you dont get a headache afterwards," said one of her fox-hunting lovers, not very elegantly; and tonight men smiled under their bearded lips at the irresponsible gaity and youth of this country girl, who had appeared on the scene just as all the other women's bloom was fading, and who wore a gauzy white frock that only an artist genuinely in love with youth could have created.

Through the jaded assemblage a rustle, a freshness went with her, and a rustle of another kind accompanied Ronald, who was stopped at every step, praised, congratulated, and made generally to feel as sick as the average Briton does on being begged to roar, when all he longs for, is to be let alone.

"Why do they all run after my cousin like sheep?" inquired Lesley, a little indignant, as most women would be, at seeing a mere man create a greater sensation than herself.

The quiet, distinguished-looking man she

addressed, whose breast was crossed by a star and ribbon, and who enjoyed to the full this tripping vision of youth and brightness, smiled and said—

"He is a very brave man."

"All men should be brave. Do you mean to say that the others here are cowards?"

"Some would be if they dared.'

"And you?"

His Excellency turned to look at her meditatively.

For all her exquisite freshness, which was able subtly to suggest the fragrance of a dew-pearled morning meadow, there was a total lack of rusticity in her, and a fearless knowledge of the heart of man and his foibles, that astonished him.

"You flatter me," he said, and smiled again, when she lifted her head with that proud little gesture which distinguished her, and actually blushed. "And yet you have never been in town before?" he said tentatively. "It was wise of you to wait till the season has tired most of us, and then come to our refreshment."

"It was not that," she said. "Father knows nothing about the seasons ; he only recognizes the hunting, the shooting, and the fishing ones. When he sent me up here, he had no

idea——" she stopped abruptly.

"He sent you? You did not wish to come then?"

"Oh, no; it was a punishment!"

"And what had you done?" inquired His Excellency, smiling, with a pretty good idea of what her delinquencies had been.

"Nothing."

If she had been nearer five feet, than five feet seven, she would have looked a very sprite of mischief and devilry as she turned her face upon him; and it struck Ronny vividly, who just then came up, that she did not look as if she had ever been ashamed of herself, or sorry in her life, and that she was up to her country tricks already.

"Are you getting tired?" he said, when he had saluted her companion. "I think mother is quite ready to go home,"—which was untrue: Lady Appuldurcombe shone glorious among mothers that night, and was enjoying herself *au bout des ongles.*

"No," said Lesley, "I am not ready. Who is the red woman in scarlet behind you?" she inquired of His Excellency, and while he was putting up his eyeglass, and turning about to see, she neatly slipped off, making a sign to Ronny to follow.

"His Excellency," he began.

"Was growing inquisitive," she said. "Would you mind telling me," she added naively, "why all these people are running after you more than any woman here? It isn't fair, it isn't even decent."—this after Ronny had been violently laid hands on half a dozen times in half as many steps.

"For no earthly reason," he replied crossly, "but that I have done what any schoolboy would—his duty."

"And to cap it all," said a voice behind them, in one of the wild-beast pauses of conversation, "he is cousin to The Lovely Malincourt! Really, the way that girl's head is set on her shoulders——"

"All this comes of being Lady Appuldurcombe's niece," said Lesley ruefully, as hers and Ronny's eyes met. "Oh, poor Dad! to let me have my frocks made in Paris, and send me as a penitent to enjoy myself under the wing of one of the greatest ladies in town!"

"How did you find that out?" he said, greatly amused.

"Come for a walk," she said gaily; and as he smiled and went, somehow he seemed to himself to have become quite old beside this buoyant mortal whom every one turned to stare at, and admire.

"If Bob Heatherly could only see you now,"

he said softly.

"Who told you about Bob?" she said faintly, and for a moment looking somewhat as she did on her arrival.

But he only laughed, and said that he intended to watch over Bob's interests in his absence; for which she thanked him maliciously, and said Bob was able to take excellent care of his own.

The rooms were thinning, persons stood out with greater distinctness, and Lesley presently caught sight of something that made her exclaim—

"How wonderful! Who is she?"

Ronny looked everywhere but in the right direction, though in every nerve of his body he knew what was there and the exact spot where she was standing.

"A woman in an orange gown whit—barbaric gleams of red and orange embroidery—she is looking at you—she is coming towards you!"

Alas! for the bravery of the bravest! If a trap door had opened at his feet down which he could have shot, Ronny the hero would have vanished through it there and then; but, as it was, he bowed, and advanced unwillingly.

"How do you do, Major Kilmurry?"

If there be sermons in stones, there are life-tragedies in voices, and Lesley knew in a flash that the woman before her had given boundless treasures of love to this man who had nothing particularly striking about his appearance, except, perhaps, the eyes that had seen so much—seen most of the great, and passed all the littlenesses of life, by.

"How do you do, Miss De Salis?" he said coldly; then introduced Lesley as "My cousin, Miss Malincourt."

As Cynthia's glance coldly swept the girl from head to foot, Lesley could scarcely have told why her heart went out to this poor woman, poor in her gorgeous robes of red and orange except that she had always been nice to her own sex, and never wilfully taken their lovers away from them, or done them any sort of mean trick, yet the friendliness she now displayed, did not wholly bridge over the discomfort of the situation, and Lady Appuldurcombe's sudden descent upon them was hailed by all as that of an angel from Heaven—an angel in three shades of mauve, illuminated by diamond drops of dew.

She was really happy, and much pleased with the lightness of her duties as chaperone to Lesley, feeling, indeed that Malincourt and Nature had managed things very nicely be-

tween them, and now here was Ronny being kind to Cynthia, and her cup of happiness was full.

"I'm quite shocked," she said, looking radiant, and touching Cynthia's arm affectionately; "we must have been here a whole hour, and will soon be the last survivors!" but here a chilliness in the air struck her, and her face changed, as Cynthia, with some light words of farewell, moved away to rejoin her mother.

"You have been unkind to her, Ronald," she said, in a reproachful whisper; but she addressed thin air, for he had already made his escape.

"My dear," she said presently, as the carriage moved at a foot pace the few yards to Park Lane, "I think you have come to save the county at the expense of Town. But the most wonderful thing about you is, not your complexion, but your clothes."

"I think those of Miss De Salis much more wonderful," said Lesley. "Why won't Ronny love her?" she broke out suddenly.

"My dear! Ronny will never marry. All my other children have done so—but he never will."

"Oh, how mad, how silly of her, to let him see how she cares!" cried Lesley, passionately. "Doesn't she know?" She paused again,

then went on irrelevantly, "every tiny scrap a woman can make a man suffer is something off their tremendous debt of cruelty to us women!"

"My dear!" said Lady Appuldurcombe, horrified, "Malincourt was always a kind man—and you do not read the newspapers!"

The carriage stopped at that moment, and Ronny was in waiting to hand them out.

"Are you prepared for more wild dissipation today?" he said, as Lesley stood on the pavement, a foam of white, looking back at the dawn that was already breaking, "because Yelverton wants you both to go down on his coach to see those absurd new sports they call Gymkhana, at Ranelagh."

"They *are* very absurd," said Lady Appuldurcombe, as they went upstairs, "a sort of romp on horseback, you know; but you must ride well to be able to do any of the ridiculous tasks that are set. And now, my dear, I think we'll go to bed."

And so they did, but Lesley found it impossible to sleep, this new world was so strange, so wonderful; and an hour later, fancying she heard a knock, she opened her door to come face to face with Lady Appuldurcombe, who started at sight of Lesley, and blushed like a girl.

"I have just been in to look at Ronny," she said, "he sleeps so sound, you know, or I should not venture. You see, my dear, I had only had him with me for twenty-four hours when you came—and for months and months I was agonizing about him, not knowing if he were killed—like Wilson and the others. Good night, or rather good morning, my child, and God bless you."

CHAPTER III.

The awful moment had arrived. Face to face with her Inquisitor sat Lesley, the Scapegrace; and the fact that the boudoir was delicious with its blue and white walls and Nankin china, that the evening before had been delightful, and that the afternoon's programme promised equally well, did not make this *mauvais quart d'heure* a scrap the more bearable, rather the reverse, in fact, to the unrepentant sinner.

"But, my dear, what have you done to be sent away in disgrace like this?" Lady Appuldurcombe was saying in very kind tones.

"Nothing. *I* didn't do anything. It was—was the other people who did it all."

"Did what?"

"Bothered me to marry them, you know, and all that," said Lesley—adding rather defiantly, "just as if I could marry them all!"

"But your father didn't complain of their falling in love with you," said her aunt. "Jilted was the word he used—that you had jilted half the county."

"Dad's weak point is his arithmetic: he never could add up anything properly,' said Lesley, with a fine air of outrage; "and we don't visit anything like half the county—it's too big!"

"But, my dear, to jilt a man you must first be engaged to him."

"Y-e-s," said Lesley, very slowly; "but you don't call it being engaged to a man, when you promise to marry him, just to keep him from worrying you morning, noon, and night?"

"But he would worry you much more if you were engaged to him!"

"Oh no! I used to make it a point of honour with them that if I promised, they were to keep their distance till I—I told them to come nearer. And I never did."

Lady Appuldurcombe smiled irrepressibly, but shook her head.

"You mean to say they never tried to kiss you?"

"S-sometimes. But they couldn't, you know,"—nodding triumphantly. "I'm too tall, and too strong," she added, drawing up her slim white figure audaciously.

"That terrible plural!" said her aunt, trying hard to look severe. "And, pray, was—Bob—neither tall enough, nor strong enough, to kiss you?"

"Oh, Bob's different! I—I was *really* engaged to Bob for a little while, you know."

"And did *he* kiss you?"

"I never kiss and tell," said Lesley, looking mischievous, and with a little impertinent uplifting of her chin that her aunt was beginning to know. "Auntie, don't you think it's rather silly to sit here asking me rude questions, when that lovely Park is simply spoiling for me to go and walk in it?"

"This is very wrong, when you don't mean to marry the man," said her aunt, determined not to smile and so rejoice the heart of the graceless young woman before her. "But as you evidently preferred him to the rest—why jilt *him?*"

"It was a point of honour with me," said Lesley, folding her hands demurely; "to make him fall in love with me, I mean. Every one warned him against me; said I only wanted to break his heart as I had broken the other ones—they're all as right as trivets, and eat and sleep like anything, auntie—not one man in a hundred has got a heart—and he didn't believe them, of course." Memory, perhaps, supplied the guileless look with which Lesley glanced up at Lady Appuldurcombe. "But he does *now!*"

Lady Appuldurcombe gave up the strug-

gle, and laughed heartily.

"When he came and asked me if it were true," continued Lesley, with an enjoying air, "that I made all the men fall in love with me just for the pleasure of throwing them over, I said, 'Do I *look* that sort of person?' And then, of course, he asked me to marry him. If I had said 'No,' the people who warned him against me would never have heard of it, and thought they had won!"

"Oh, Lesley, Lesley! I pity your father!"

"You needn't, auntie; he doesn't want me to marry anybody—only he stuck at Bob. For some unearthly man's reason, he *loves* Bob, and I don't," concluded this extremely unattached young woman, decisively.

"Lesley," said her aunt, meditatively, "do you mean to behave like this in town?"

The girl laughed, and, springing up, began to dance a measure.

> "Moving light as all young things,
> As young birds, and early wheat
> When the wind steals over it . . ."

"I'm so happy!" she said pleadingly; "don't spoil it all by scolding me, auntie! Just think if you had to take me on a coach when I had been crying!"

"But, my dear——"

"No one will fall in love with me here,"

affirmed Lesley; "it's an utterly different thing to the country, where I *live* in the very midst of men! Dads master of hounds, you know, and then he has big shoots, and he has got capital trout-fishing — any girl who wasn't sphinx or a dolly would be bound to have heaps of lovers! And it's very catching, for men are just like sheep—what one man fancies, they all want, or think they do!"

Lady Appuldercombe shook her head rebukingly. She had not nearly got to the bottom of her inquiries yet.

"But, oh!" cried Lesley, standing in the middle of the room, and throwing out her arms with a gesture of irrepressible youth and lightheartedness, "it's *so* fascinating to make a man fall in love with you! Once you take a real interest in the game you can't stop, and—and——"

She smiled, as at pleasant memories, looking straight before her, and her long arms fell at her sides.

"It must be perfectly delightful for the men, I am sure," said her aunt, with real displeasure. "Well, I give you warning, Miss Lesley, that if you try any of your tricks on here, I shall pack you back to Malincourt at an hour's notice, without that good character you promised to earn."

Lesley came near, and looked coaxingly at her with those eyes, exactly the colour of riverside forget-me-nots, and set about with curly black eyelashes, that were perhaps the most uncommon beauty of her face.

"You can't stop it, dear," she said, kneeling down beside her; "the men being nice to me, I mean. I am Lady Appuldurcombe's niece, you know, and——"

"I give you up," said her aunt, spreading out two elegant hands, palms downwards. "But to turn to a more agreeable subject, who has educated you, my dear, on the subject of clothes?"

"It isn't another subject; it's *me,*" said Lesley, earnestly. "That is where I have always scored over the other girls—besides knowing such lots of men. *I* don't do anything, it's my clothes and my hair—the way it's dressed, I mean; it's the rarest thing in the world to find a well-dressed head in the country!"

"It is a woman's first duty," said Lady Appuldurcombe, with real solemnity; "but you are very young to know it. Then it is not merely choosing the right clothes, or going to the right people, it's the way you wear them that's everything—and where did you pick up that way, child?"

"I know an awfully clever woman," said

Lesley, her eyes kindling, "and among other things, she gave me this advice: always wear white if you can, and as long as you can, but if you don't, be careful not to mix your colours up any more than you would mix your wine; or in furnishing a room—she has given me no end of wrinkles about all sorts of things."

"And who is the woman?" said Lady Appuldurcombe, approvingly. "Really, my dear, you are fortunate in such a neighbour, buried as you are."

"Lady Cranstoun." The name came out with a certain timid defiance, as her aunt's face changed conspicuously.

"I have heard of her," said Lady Appuldurcombe, coldly, with whom there was never any question of knowing, or not knowing, certain people.

"She had an accident in the hunting-field this year," continued Lesley, proudly and coldly, "and she will have to lie down for the rest of her life, which cannot be a long one."

"She had some remarkably good innings," said Lady Appuldurcombe, with a disengaged air, as if totally uninterested in the subject.

"And a husband who ruined her life," said Lesley, with flashing eyes and intense energy. "Perhaps if I had never known *her,* I should

not be so hard on men as I am today."

She walked to the window, and stood looking out. Her aunt could only see the back of a raven-dark little head, that, for all its artful dressing, would break rebelliously, now and then, into curls.

"And so she chose your dresses for you, my dear?" said Lady Appuldurcombe, "and your maid. And she has done it very cleverly, I must say. But how did you manage that gown you had on last night?"

"A pattern bodice to Mason," said the girl, in a singularly lifeless tone. "The dress only arrived here after dinner last night. I love her," she broke out passionately. "You must not say anything against her to me, auntie, please, for I could not bear it."

Lady Appuldurcombe had moved away to her writing-table, where, every morning, she was busy with the business of a woman of fashion, who can always make time for what she pleases.

"You could not have a safer guide than Lady Cranstoun in—clothes," she said drily.

"Auntie," cried the girl, "is there any such thing as real Christianity in the world—one single Christian woman? You know her story. How she committed one fault—*one*. How she married a brute the first time, then left him

for a man who treated her worse."

"That looks rather as if it were Lady Cranstoun's fault, does it not?" said Lady Appuldurcombe, arranging the writing materials before her; but her face was grave. She was thinking it was no wonder Cecelia's child had been up to so many tricks with such companionship as her father had suffered her to fall into.

"We shall never agree on this point, auntie," said the girl, in young, vibrating tones. "I shall always stand up for the women, through thick and thin, and, if I can ever do one a good turn, I will. When I see the suffering caused by men——"

"And when I see the suffering caused by women," said Lady Appuldurcombe, softly.

"I've got to see it yet. Meanwhile——"

"Meanwhile, my dear, go down to the drawing-room and try and forget you are very angry with me just now. Ronny is seeing about a horse for you, I know, so you will have your gallop in the park tomorrow morning. We don't go down to Ranelagh till after lunch."

The door closed. Lesley was gone.

"She is a good hater," said Lady Appuldurcombe, as she dipped her pen in the ink, "and a warm friend," she added, in the same breath.

CHAPTER IV.

Ranelagh, nowadays, stands in much the same relation to Hurlingham as a young beauty, in a mob-cap and cotton gown, washing her face in the morning dew, does to a Court belle, all powder and patches, and trailing brocaded skirts; and the world seems to prefer the sweet rustic, for the present, though for all her unsophisticated air, she is at heart very much the same.

The quaint house, through which you pass to the grounds, sets your thoughts and memory working, and many a famous scene rises unbidden to the eye; but, to young folks, who have not destroyed the pleasures of reality by the over-study of books, Ranelagh is simply a charmingly sylvan spot, conveniently near town, in which one may spend a few hours very pleasantly, without the inducement of those eccentric sports that everybody has ostensibly come to see, and laugh at.

By the time Mr. Yelverton had brought his team, with a flourish, round the wide sweep of grass opposite the seats arranged for spec-

tators, the little hurt had gone out of Lesley's heart, and that pucker from her brow, which had made Ronny shake his head at his mother in a way the latter felt unkind, when they were starting from Park Lane.

Lesley was herself again—a most refreshing self, judging by Yelverton's fits of laughter, and the occasional difficulties he had got into coming down, through listening to her, instead of minding his own business; but luckily the horses knew theirs, and when, at last, thep stopped, Ronny climbed up behind the boxseat, and promptly asked the two what they had been laughing at.

Lesley refused to tell, and Mr. Yelverton backed her up, while his mother, now the grooms were gone, was at liberty to impart such information as she thought fit, to the men on the coach, who displayed a great thirst for information about "The Lovely Malincourt," as the world had already named her.

"She has a will of her own, and she had never heard of Ronny in her life," she confided, by-and-by, to a *vieille moustache,* when the others had got down to examine the ponies, and dummies, and other odds and ends that make Gymkhana such a huge joke to the lookers on.

"And now she won't even listen to him," said the old boy, grinning, as he looked at the three before him and thinking that Master Ronny, who had gone scot-free all his life, might get a rap from a slip of a girl over the knuckles yet.

"I believe you were laughing at my expense," Ronny was insisting, and addressing the back of Lesley's head.

"You!"

Lesley turned a little scornful face ever so slightly towards him, the face upon which, she instinctively felt, he was always looking for those marks that the kisses of half a county should, by rights, have left upon them.

"I shall call you Aristides," she said. "Didn't the people banish him because they were sick of hearing of his virtues?"

The words were rude, but a certain quality in her voice made them merely piquante.

"Meaning that I'm a dull dog," said Ronny, imperturbably. "Well, so I am. But I'm very tenacious, too. What *were* you laughing at?"

Lesley glanced down, and saw Cynthia walking past. This, then, was the reason she could not dislodge him.

"If you really must know," she said, "we were talking about—frills."

"Frills!"

Yelverton threw himself back, and laughed. He had met nothing so much to his taste as Lesley the entire season, or, indeed, any other season that he could remember.

"Frills!" repeated Lesley, solemnly, who, like a real woman, chose to visit on Ronny some of the discomfort his mother had caused her that morning. "You men are so fond of them. You like heaps and heaps of them; and the more frills, and the more lace, we can cram on to our skirts, the nicer you think we look, and the more you love us! I'm sure that half the wife desertions, and domestic tragedies in the world are caused by a scarcity of —frills. It's the contrast, I suppose, of your strength and the frivolity of our—frills, that intoxicates you!"

"'Pon my word, Miss Malincourt," said Mr. Yelverton, gravely, "I've often thought that it's all that foam of lace makes the dancing girls catch on so; and you've hit the right nail on the head—it's not *them* we love, it's their frills! Just as the more respectable a woman is, the more stout leg she shows in the street ——"

But Lesley did not seem to hear, and Ronny, at the risk of breaking his neck, had precipitously descended, and was seen marching off with disgust strongly imprinted all down

his back.

Lesley drew in her breath.

"I've done it now!" she said, nodding, and looking up into the kind, ugly face of her companion like a naughty child who is asking a bigger and a naughtier one what he thinks her punishment will be. "I did it on purpose, you know, to shock him. You'll forget it all, every word, won't you?"

"And pray, what harm was there in it?" inquired Mr. Yelverton stoutly. "You should hear some of 'em talk——"

"Only I'm not some of 'em," said Lesley, coldly, and lifting her proud little head after her own distinctive fashion. "You were telling me, when Major Kilmurry came——"

"About that bay mare? She's rippin'. If I bring her round to Park Lane tomorrow, at ten, will Lady Appuldurcombe mind your trying her?"

"Of course not," said Lesley, then remembered that she was, to a certain extent, in pawn, or at least baggage to be disposed of as her temporary owners pleased.

"When are they going to begin?" she exclaimed. "It seems a lot of running about, and nothing done; like a Punch and Judy show with dog Toby and the Baby left out!"

Mr. Yelverton grinned.

"Wait till you see the Johnnies being rigged up in fancy dress by their *Donahs,*" he said. "It *is* silly. That's why people like it. Makes them feel so superior, you know. It's when they're asked to enjoy things a cut above 'em and feel small, they get mad. Just you wait for the refreshment stakes! Competitors have to light a cigar, which must be kept alight the *whole* time, jump a hurdle, dismount at table, eat a sponge cake, open a bottle of soda-water, mix with whisky or brandy, and drink it, remount, jump hurdle, and gallop in. But this one isn't such a tommy-rot; they start in pairs, jump a hurdle, and one man takes tent-peg and the other a ring—if they can get it. Here they come at last!"

Lesley leaned over as the ponies dashed past, then clapped her hands.

"That was clever!" she said, as one of the riders, going at full speed, picked off, with a long, spear-like weapon, the ring suspended from a wooden staple on his left. "And that was stupid," she added, as the other man missed tent-peg on the right. "Let us get down," and, without waiting for the ladder, did so, with a nimbleness and dexterity that argued a long acquaintance with coaches, and joints of extreme suppleness.

"I believe you drive a team yourself," said Mr. Yelverton, when he had joined her, and Lady Appuldurcombe was also descending, but in more leisurely style.

"No; but a friend of ours, Mr. Heath"—she stopped abruptly—"has, and Dad and I often go out with him on it."

"Same old game," he thought. "Where there's a pretty girl, there's sure to be a coach—no, I mean——"

This was the last he saw of Lesley for some time. She was pounced upon, appropriated, divided, and introduced, till she began to think of climbing the coach again, just to get rid of those men, who all seemed to her exactly alike, and left no permanent impression on her mind.

Once she saw Cynthia de Salis, at a little distance, who did not appear to see her. She was dressed in white, and her beauty had the same troubling effect on Lesley's mind that it had on so many others, for it was as impossible to overlook, as to forget her.

"I should go mad about her, if I were a man," Leslie thought; "but what a pity she has that dash of red in her hair! Red-haired women are so terribly faithful! What were you saying, Excellency?" to her friend of over-night, who had quietly made his way

to her.

"That it's a pity Kilmurry is not riding today."

"Would his dignity stand being dressed up by his 'lady' in fancy costume, like those men over there?" inquired Lesley, scornfully.

"Well, we should have the treat of seeing him ride, anyway."

"And can he ride?" There was keen interest in Lesley's tone, for, if she hated men, she adored horses from the bottom of her soul.

The men surrounding her stared.

"Don't you know," said one of them, "that Ronny Kilmurry is the finest gentleman-rider in England?"

Lesley stamped her little foot on the soft grass, and vowed she must have tea, or die.

But that stamp of the foot meant—

"I'm *sick* of Ronny, and his bravery, and his riding, and his perfection as a son. Hasn't he got a weakness *anywhere?* It almost makes one want to see—Bob!"

CHAPTER V.

THE clock pointed at five minutes to ten, and Lesley, in hat and habit—the waistcoat was really the most swagger part of the whole concern—was leaning over the balcony, sharply criticizing the points of a neat hack that was being slowly led up and down outside for her inspection.

She shook her head at last decisively, longing to see Ronny, to tell him that if he *did* know how to ride, choosing a horse for a lady was a matter in which she could very easily show him the way; and just then Mr. Yelverton appeared with a groom behind him, leading a matchless bay mare, who picked her steps delicately, and arched her glorious neck, her coat shining like satin in the sun.

"You *beauty!*" cried Lesley from the bottom of her soul in ecstasy; and Yelverton looked up to the balcony, flushing all over his ugly, honest face at sight of her.

"I'm so glad you like Miss Coquette," he said eagerly, then glanced doubtfully at the horse being led to and fro. "Won't you come

down and try her?"

"You can take that horse away!" said Lesley, waving a slender, majestic arm in the direction of the stables to Ronny's groom; and the man, wondering, obeyed, though not before Yelverton had said something quickly to him, to which he replied briefly in assent as he touched his hat.

Lesley ran downstairs three steps at a time, and out into the road. She had not time to shake hands with Yelverton, but quite enough to stroke the mare's velvet nose, and give her the bit of sugar she had made ready for Ronny's despised beast. As Yelverton swung her, light as a bird, into the saddle, and she stuck her foot into the stirrups, settling her skirts cleverly with one shake, the mare pricked up her delicate ears, and began to dance as if infected by the frivolous atmosphere of youth that Lesley always seemed to diffuse, or perhaps because she knew she had something very special on her back; but certain it is that Lesley, by voice and touch, encouraged her in her tricks, till Yelverton, looking on at the delightful pair, was seized with qualms as to what they might, or might not do, next.

It would be difficult to say which settled the question, the two feminine things appeared

so entirely of one mind; but while Yelverton was anxiously inquiring the whereabouts of Major Kilmurry from Charville, Miss Coquette edged playfully off towards Stanhope Gate, and Lady Appuldurcombe appeared on the balcony just in time to see Lesley disappearing at a smart canter down the park, with Yelverton rapidly overtaking her.

She stood looking after them in perplexity —where was Ronny, and why was Yelverton taking his place? The sight of one of her grooms in hot pursuit of the pair rather relieved her mind; still, it was all incomprehensible, and altogether wrong, thought the great lady, with some very real concern as she gazed after them.

Of course, the girl could not be expected to know the proprieties, and Yelverton was about as safe a man as a girl could be seen with, still! And then Lady Appuldurcombe thought of her brother-in-law, not exactly with blessing, and reverted to her original assertion that she never, never could forgive him. One could not help loving Lesley, to be sure, but Lesley was certainly a handful in town as well as country.

Some idea of sending Charville or Parker to bring the girl back, crossed her mind, but that would be to make everybody ridiculous,

herself included, so she sat down to her escritoire trying to preserve her soul in patience, and only hoping that Ronny might have arranged to meet them in the Row.

Meanwhile, the fair Malincourt was "going it like steam," as the very considerable number of persons who already knew her, with some amusement remarked an hour or so later.

On Yelverton's mare—that was a good deal better known by sight in town than some of the principal people in it—in Yelverton's company, quite alone—well, it was rather rapid, don't you know—but no one could deny that she rode better, dressed better, and looked better than any girl who had shown in the Row that season.

The world grinned at the great Lady Appuldurcombe being caught socially tripping, and even the immovable face of her man-servant behind the pair did not mend matters in the least. Yelverton, thoroughly uncomfortable, had tried to persuade Lesley to go towards a more unfrequented part of the Park, but she liked the shade of the trees, and to watch the people, she said, so drew up at the rails, and soon had round her most of the men who had been introduced to her since she arrived in town.

She talked to them all with the grace and fearlessness that distinguished her, yet without one word or look to which Lady Appuldurcombe could possibly have taken exception, with no veil to hide the rich bloom on her cheek, the peculiar blue of her clear eyes, the swift-changing emotions, all keen and delightful, that came and went on her little spirited, joyous face.

She found one or two old Somersetshire friends among the somewhat sparse crowd; men who had almost forgiven her for jilting them, just as she had entirely forgotten any cause of offence they might have against her, and she was having the best of good times, while Yelverton was having the worst, when Ronald Kilmurry rode up, by sheer force of control hiding the intense annoyance he felt.

"Very sorry to be so late, cousin," he said, lifting his hat to Lesley and nodding to several men in the group; "will you find it too hot for a turn?"

And before she knew his intention, he had turned her bridle-rein, and they were galloping down the Row side by side.

"Seems in a hurry," Lesley heard one man say to another; then somebody laughed, and staring in amazement at Ronny, she saw him clench his teeth, while the riders who knew

and passed him, observed that glory evidently did not suit Kilmurry's constitution.

"What made you go off with Yelverton like that?" he said abruptly, "and on his mare? How dare the fellow!" he muttered furiously. "Was not the horse I sent round for you good enough?"

Lesley checked the mare so suddenly that a less perfect rider would have been unseated, and with Miss Coquette standing stock-still, called after Ronny without raising her voice.

"It was just a—*screw!*"

Ronny, who had shot beyond, came back with a bad grace.

"I did the best I could," he said coldly. "In the height of the season it is not easy to pick up exactly what one wants. But what made you slip off with Yelverton like that? I was delayed——"

"Slip off!" Lesley positively quivered with rage as she rested her hand on the back of her saddle and faced round on Ronny. "How *dare* you!" she said, very low; "but this is Dad's doing; at home no one would dare to insult me so! Slip-off! As if I were a kitchen-maid sneaking out of a back door with a footman!"

"Lesley," said the young man sternly, "there isn't a soul who has seen you this morning alone with Yelverton, and riding

Coquette, but thinks either that you are engaged to him—or want to be."

Lesley put the mare at a walk, trembled violently, and turned away her head so that he could not see her face. He thought she was crying, and his anger showed to him as disproportionate against this young, frivolous thing—his guest.

"There," he said, more kindly, "don't cry—we must make the best of it, especially to my mother."

She turned round then, and he saw that she was laughing fit to kill herself, and looking at him with a sort of pity through tears of mirth.

"Oh, it's such a *joke!*" she said, when she was able to speak. "My wanting to be—be—engaged to anybody; it's just the other way round!" And she wiped her eyes, and smiled sunnily, having now completely recovered her good humour.

But Ronny did not laugh; he looked straight ahead like the angry man he was.

"And don't you think," she went on, "that it's rather absurd for a—hero—to bully a girl for doing in the Park, with people all round, what she would not think twice about doing in the country quite alone? Why, I've often shown Dad's friends the way from the start to the kill, and *he* never thought of getting

blue in the face from shock!"

"That's Somersetshire,' said Ronny, curtly, "and this is town. Ladies don't do such things here."

"No, they do worse," said Lesley, smartly. "I didn't shut my eyes the other night at the menagerie, or last night out at dinner, or yesterday at Ranelagh, and a country girl would *blush* to behave as most of your town ladies do!"

They had got to Knightsbridge by now, and the sun was smiting down on them with rays fierce as the wrath that burned hot in their undisciplined hearts.

"But appearances must be respected," began Ronny, then stopped, for he was preaching a gospel the reverse of what he believed in, only he was his mother's mouthpiece just then, and reflecting some of her anger and worry when, on his return home, he had discovered through Charville how matters lay.

"Poor hero!" said Lesley, with genuine contempt in her tone; "after all, Dad was right in hating town and calling it the City of Shams—you don't seem able to think or see straight here, from your heart, I mean; it's all from outside, through other people's eyes and prejudices!"

She shook her head so sorrowfully that

Ronny burst out laughing, whereupon she joined in, saying encouragingly—

"It's so stupid to make a fuss about little things when there are such lots of big ones to cry over, isn't it? But I'm very glad you've got a temper," she added confidentially; "you were getting very trying with your everlasting goodness! Isn't it almost time to turn back?"

"And I am afraid you will never die of goodness, Lesley," he said. "Won't you go home this way?" he added disingenuously; it's much prettier—and it must be nearly lunch time now."

"No, I won't," said Lesley, turning the mare, and throwing Ronny a dazzling smile over her shoulder, that, for the first time, convinced him she was a born flirt.

"I haven't said good-bye to Mr. Yelverton, or thanked him for the treat I've had on this beauty;" and she whispered something in the beauty's ear that made her dance sidelong, and arch her neck, and play off as many tricks as a belle at her first ball.

He said nothing, adapting his horse's pace to Miss Coquette's, till the pair, tired of capers, condescended to range themselves sedately by his side; and the first remark, as usual when a woman is entirely in the wrong,

came from Lesley.

"I'm glad Bob is not a cousin," she said.

"Why?"

"He might think himself privileged to be —horrid!"

"I think Mr. Bob has got his work cut out for him," said Ronny, who looked so disturbed, so altogether unlike his usual careless self, that Cynthia, in a deliciously cool blue cambric gown, who saw them coming, told herself that the blow had fallen at last, and this girl, who was turning all the men's heads, was turning one that had never been turned before.

"Good-bye, Mr. Yelverton; thank you so much for the treat you have given me!" she heard Lesley say, in that spontaneous, sincere way natural to her; and then Ronny's voice saying, "Could you look me up at the Rag after lunch, Yelverton?" And without waiting for an answer, galloped off after Lesley, who had, as was generally admitted among the nodding left-behinds, fairly "taken the cake" in cheek that morning.

CHAPTER VI.

"RONNY," said Lesley, when he joined her (and it struck him that, though cousins, this was the first time she had thus addressed him), "will—will she be *very* angry, do you think? The mare just danced off with me when I was trying her paces, and I didn't think—no more did she!"

She looked then as she had done on her arrival—apprehensive and proud and shy, all in one, and Ronny's heart smote him. She had no mother, only Lady Cranstoun for a friend, and a mother is able to teach her daughter so much, and keep from her so much that she may not learn, and the girl had been thrown entirely among men—so much was apparent in her supreme mastery of their little ways, and the uncommon lightness of her hand with them. Perhaps, if she had been constantly with nice women—but here he stopped, knowing how, in that case, the originality, the freshness of her mind would have been lost, and to Ronny originality of character was the one precious mental good on

earth.

"It is a pity," he began, then paused again. Really, for such a remarkably cool young man, Ronny was getting himself into a good many holes that morning. "Would you like to have the mare, Lesley?" he said, in so reasonable and kind a voice that tears started into her proud eyes. "She isn't up to Yelverton's weight, I know, and he might sell her—to please you," he added, with a smile that made his face pure sunshine.

"Oh, Ronny!" exclaimed the girl, turning upon him a face whose delicious glow of colour intoxicated his eyes; "how *lovely* that would be! I'll write home today and ask Dad to buy her for me!"

"But I want her for myself," said Ronny (Lesley's face fell); "and, meanwhile, I'll lend her to you; though, of course, I don't know if Yelverton will part with her, till I've asked him."

Lesley leaned over and stroked Coquette's splendid neck, and when Lesley confidentially informed her that she was much too beautiful to be ridden by a rude, cross, heavy man, Ronny smiled away the last remnants of his ill-humour, and they arrived at Park Lane in the best of spirits, a good deal to Lady Appuldurcombe's wrath, as she watched the return

of the prodigal (for once, a female—why are all flagitious examples and heroes of rascaldom invariably of the masculine gender in grammar?) from the balcony.

Since Ronny had rushed in to announce the full measure of Lesley's delinquencies, and rushed out again to get a horse saddled to follow her, his mother had been enduring, not one, but nearly four shocking quarters of an hour; and now, culprit and envoy came home laughing, on the best of terms, evidently, with each other!

To an outsider it all looked so entirely right, the two young aristocrats, with the groom behind them, whose face wore that air of impenetrable calm peculiar to all well-bred servants, and only faintly to be imitated by their masters; but, inside, Carleton was one broad grin, and wishing the young lady well out of the "row."

Ronny begged the girl off all he could; still, for a nasty five minutes, Lesley's youth suffered eclipse, and she winced under her aunt's icy reproofs, like a child who, never having heard of blows, suddenly finds them showered upon him by the hand that he most trusted.

She made no defence, she shed no tears, and Ronny admired her pluck heartily, as she sat at table, making a pretence of eating

what was put before her, her proud little head held as high as ever, the only scrap of colour in her face being her exquisite blue eyes.

Perhaps a little ache of jealousy in the mother's heart helped to harden it against the girl, for was not Ronny *hers*, her very own boy, who had never left her, like her other children, and now, was she to lose all his time and company, because Malincourt had foisted on her a female scamp whose only accomplishment seemed to lie in getting the length of every man's foot who approached her?

"Auntie," said Lesley, very quietly, when the sermon was over, "I am going to write to father, and ask him to let me go home. I don't want to—disgrace you any more."

Her voice was quite steady, and her eyes, as she looked at her aunt, were just as indomitable in their sheer, downright, dogged British pluck, as Ronny's own; at times, indeed, a strong likeness flashed out between the girl and man, and Lady Appuldurcombe saw it, coloured, wavered, for she was of a different order to Ronny and Lesley, and, consequently, much more easy to manage, a fact of which her servants took liberal advantage.

"Have we been so inhospitable, then?" said the poor lady, and sank into tears behind her dinner-napkin, which in her flurry she mis-

took for her pocket-handkerchief; but Lesley jumped up so quickly as to upset her chair, and crying out—

"No, no, *no!*" threw her warm arms round her aunt's neck. "It isn't you—it is *I*—who have been mad, and rude, and wicked, and get into scrapes wherever I go!"

Ronny softly closed the door on them, and, as he did so, he heard his mother say plaintively—

"My dear, if only people did not know you were Lady Appuldurcombe's niece!" Whereupon he smiled, though there had been something suspiciously like moisture in his eyes just now.

Then he went round to the Rag, where he found Yelverton, looking miserable.

"I'm awfully sorry, Kilmurry," said that gentleman, with a good deal of colour in his face. "The fact is, the mare started of her own accord, and what could I do but follow? I ought to have stayed behind, I suppose; but I felt uneasy at Miss Malincourt's going into the Park alone. I told the groom to come on as sharp as possible, and he did."

Ronny nodded; he looked quite his usual, good-tempered self again, to Yelvelton's intense relief.

"I suppose you wouldn't part with the

mare?" he said tentatively.

Yelverton's face fell, and he hesitated. The mare was the apple of his eye, and only yesterday he would have refused a kingdom for her. Then he thought of how Lesley and she had looked together; of the girls' swaying figure, as, beneath the trees, she talked alternately to her admirers and Coquette; but he cleared his throat as he said—

"She's really not up to my weight, you know, and I shan't hunt this winter; off to India, with some other fellows, shooting big game. I'll take a hundred for her, if you really fancy her."

But he spoke heavily, and Ronny, as men will understand men, thoroughly understood him. After all, what was a girl's caprice to come between a man and his trusty friend, his horse? Lesley must make shift to do without her—she had so much else.

"That's unwise, Yelverton," said Ronny. "She is worth at least three hundred guineas, and I couldn't take her as a gift. We'll say no more about it."

"And I say it is *not* a gift," said Yelverton, stubbornly. "I'm pretty sure she's a bit groggy in that off leg. Did you notice? And you will really confer a personal favour on me by buying her. Stony-broke, you know," he mum-

bled, "money an object just now."

For half a minute the two looked straight into each other's eyes; then Ronny said kindly—

"So hard hit, old man? Well, then, if you'll take a couple of hundred, you'll lay me under no end of an obligation, and make Miss Malincourt supremely happy."

Then ensued a somewhat protracted and animated wrangle; but the end of it all was, that Miss Coquette ate her corn in Ronny Kilmurry's stables that night, and Lesley fell asleep happy, while Lady Appuldurcombe, waking frequently, congratulated herself on a scandal having been neatly nipped in the bud by Ronny's admirable generalship, but still felt that Malincourt she less than ever could forgive.

And to all whom it might concern was made known in the Park next morning that Ronny Kilmurry had bought Yelverton's famous mare for his cousin, Miss Malincourt, who liked her paces; while report added that Yelverton would not have parted with her under any consideration, but that he was head over ears in love with The Lovely Malincourt, who certainly did wear the smartest waistcoats, own the best seat in the saddle, and break

more hearts, than any other woman then in town.

CHAPTER VII.

"HEAVEN," said Lady Appuldurcombe, to her old crony, Lady de Salis, "must certainly be a place where there are no relations!"

And she glanced across to where, by the open bow-window, Lesley, quite out of earshot, was drinking tea with Cynthia, and talking with the keenest interest to her companion, who on her side was smiling, and without the weary air that usually distinguished her.

"Who is she going to marry?" said Lady de Salis, putting up her *pince-nez* to look at the pair. "Yelverton seems a little in advance of the rest, but the noble army of lovers swells daily."

"I don't know," said Lady Appuldurcombe; "I wish I did. It isn't '*How* can ye gang, lassie?' with her; it's '*Where* will ye gang, lassie?'—you see I can't help occasionally dropping into Scotch—and where she chooses to gang, she will gang, and there's an end of it."

"Console yourself," said Lady de Salis; "there are only three weeks more of the sea-

son. And where is Ronny today?" she added, with an effort, he being the one subject who was never discussed *en plein coeur* between the two friends.

"Oh, horses, as usual. He can't keep out of the saddle, and I believe is going to ride some trumpery race at Sandown next week. He and Lesley are decidedly blood relations in one particular—they both prefer horses to humans. It's very trying for him that there are no race-meetings now worth mentioning —nothing before Doncaster," added his mother, who would cheerfully have seen the seasons advanced, or put back, to please her beloved.

"They seem to be great friends," said Lady de Salis, with something peculiar in her tone. "I seldom see one without the other, nowadays."

"He is more at home than usual, certainly," said Lady Appuldurcombe, hastily; "but that is only to help me look after her—because neither of us know what she will do next! After her boxing that man's ears at Berkshire House the other night——"

"He was a nasty man!" said Lady de Salis, with a gesture and look of disgust. "All the other women, including Cynthia, had longed to do it; but they had not Lesley's courage. A

few hundred girls like her in society would work a wholesome reformation in the men's manners; and, unconventional as she is, from head to foot, and in every word and action, she is a thorough-bred—like all your family, Jane," she added, smiling.

"A Buck," Lesley was saying, meditatively; "wouldn't it be nice to have an admirer who was a real young buck of the old school—white satin continuations, seals, an embroidered waistcoat of the briefest, a rolled stock, and a gorgeous coat—like the lovers in Marcus Stone's pictures?"

"They would usurp our privileges," said Cynthia, whose coldness was fast melting before Lesley's friendliness; "and think how it would dock the married women's clothes if *two* sumptuous wardrobes had to be provided instead of one!"

"Well, the men are dreadfully monotonous," said Lesley, with a dissatisfied air. "If they would only wear red ties, or something, to prevent one's mistaking them for the waiters! And often the waiters look so much more like gentlemen than the real ones do! It's a treat to behold a man in his racing colours. Are you going to see Ronny ride at Sandown?" she added, looking away from Cynthia, who was beautiful today, in a tawny-

pink muslin gown, that made one think of a softly glowing topaz as one looked at her.

"Does he ride?"

Cynthia's voice was steady; but into her

> "Dark eyes' splendour,
> Where the warm light loves to dwell," . . .

came the look that only Ronny Kilmurry, out of all men living, had been able to bring there —and bid stay.

"Yes. Isn't it a pity he is so spoilt? Because he is the first gentleman rider in England, and because he just did his duty in Africa, it seems to me he is in danger of becoming a very selfish, disagreeable young man indeed!"

"It isn't either of those things," said Cynthia, colouring, and looking out at the park; "it is because he is such a splendid fellow all round. He is the very best type of Englishman, but he is also Scotch—deep, strong, sincere, a little hard perhaps outwardly, but though it is hidden ever so deep, his heart is tender enough when you can reach it."

"He is just an extremely clean-looking, obstinate, high-principled, masterful Briton!" said Lesley, nodding; "and if some woman who didn't care a button for him licked him into shape, he might make a fairly decent husband to some other woman some day; but his mother and the rest have spoilt him, and

he'll want no end of discipline first!"

Lesley wagged her head with an air of the deepest conviction, and Cynthia's spirits flew up as she said, laughing—

"You know a great deal for eighteen, Miss Malincourt."

"I'm twenty. Auntie was a good bit out in my age—but it isn't necessary for me to disabuse her mind of the error. It's the country life I've led. And to do *what* you like, and how you like, and have no one to hamper or oppose you in any of your whims, is the finest recipe for bloom and good temper imaginable!"

Cynthia smiled.

"We can't all let ourselves go," she said. "Some people have *got* to learn self-control —and once they've thoroughly learned that lesson," she added, in a lower tone, "they have about learned all there is to know!"

"I think I could learn that lesson, too—if I'd got to," said Lesley, with something strenuous in her young face and voice. "And I suppose I shall have to, some day—for all the women must—and the men, never!"

"Ronny has learnt it," said Cynthia.

Lesley longed to shake this glorious creature, whom love had humbled to the point of making herself cheap.

"And is it wise to tell him so?" she said.

"You must keep a man hungry—hungry—or he will never do his best, or love you his best—never! A man's self-control lasts just so long as he does not want a thing. He clamours and cries for it like a child, when once his eye has coveted it!"

"How you hate men!" said Cynthia, under her breath.

"I do. Whenever I find a bad woman, I say, 'A bad man has passed by there!' Lady Cranstoun says I am mad on that point—and they are all so good to me. But it isn't *me*—it's my little face! When it gets broad and middle-aged, men's eyes will look past it, with their life-love seeking for some delicate morsel with which to satisfy their pleasure! It's just the difference between a cat and a kitten—the cat broadens out, gets sedate; when a woman's face doesn't broaden, she is beautiful to her dying day, like our Princess—it's her *little* face that does it—and I want some one to love me when the frolic and youth and play are out of my bones, and out of my looks—but I've got to find him first!"

"But some men will love you for your heart—yourself!" cried out Cynthia, to whom this country girl was a revelation, "and you always look so boundlessly, intoxicatingly happy!"

"Yes, I am happy! But I go much among the poor at Malincourt. I see life as it is; and perhaps for good, perhaps for ill—who knows—I have been the close companion for years of a woman who knows the world, and turns it inside out for me, like a glove—with every seam showing. So I have faith, and no illusions."

"And, thus panoplied, your friend has let you forth as a scourge on mankind," said Cynthia, who had heard of Lesley's exploits in the country. "And yet—I am sorry!"

"Don't!" cried Lesley, earnestly. "I feel I know—I shall come out all right in the end. Would you send a soldier unprepared into battle? And I find her teaching invaluable, now that Dad has launched me on all the temptations of town."

They were so engrossed in each other, that they did not hear the door open, or see Ronny, who stopped short at sight of Lady de Salis; but retreat was impossible; and, having received that lady's cool salutations, he advanced to the balcony, where a white, and a topaz-coloured back, both young, presented themselves for his inspection.

They looked friendly, intimate even, those two girlish backs, and he surveyed one of them with that ferocity—displayed only to

reptiles, and the woman who has given him a love he does not want—that a really strong man feels and displays, to his inward shame and astonishment on occasion.

The weak man is flattered; he sometimes dallies with the suppliant, and rewards the woman by becoming her tyrant. But the virile, selfish, masterful man will stoop to pick up no handkerchief dropped to him; he will throw his own, wheresoever and howsoever he just pleases, and seldom throws it in vain.

It was Lesley who turned, feeling some one near her, and exclaimed tartly—

"Why didn't you speak?" and looking so decidedly sorry to see him, that Ronny felt it a relief to turn to Cynthia, who, for once, showed no undue joy at his approach, though under the broad, black lace hat her face was full of most delicate colour.

"We were abusing men," said Lesley, calmly; "did you hear us?"

"Yet, though you detest, you cannot leave us alone," said Ronny, lightly.

"We had exhausted *chiffons;* and when every other subject has been talked out, the least interesting is bound to have its day," said Lesley, frowning. "The fact is, the old ladies—I beg your pardon, Ronny!—won't leave each other, and Charville has worn out

his two young gentlemen in sending up cups of tea! But why this honour? I thought you were capering before a glass in Bond Street, trying on your new jacket—and deciding that blue became you——"

Ronny looked black. Lesley was making herself just as odious as she knew how—and Cynthia, shy and gentle, actually shone in comparison with her at that moment.

He turned to Cynthia now, asking some question about one of her brothers; and Lesley's eyes filled with satisfied mischief as she looked on—really, after all, Cynthia was capable of being taught.

Warmly, loyally, with that loyalty to her own sex that is so rare in woman, Lesley had espoused Cynthia's cause; and nothing would have given her greater pleasure than to see Ronny brought to his knees, and left lamenting there, by the girl whose faithful love he had scorned.

"Mr. Yelverton!" announced Charville, who always looked like a handsome bishop in disguise; and Cynthia suddenly became aware that while actually standing in the flesh on the balcony beside her, Ronny's spirit was really in the room behind them, straining his ears to catch every word Roger Yelverton said.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Lady Cranstoun has done her a great deal of harm, but not so much as I thought," said Ronny, during one of those cosy chats in which his mother's heart delighted. "Her heart is sound, no matter how her judgment may have been warped by that woman's teaching. Still, it's pitiful to see a girl who might have fallen naturally into the delicious dream of love, fallen into a decent fellow's hands who would have kept the scales on her eyes a long while, perhaps always——"

"Then they *are* scales, Ronny?" said his mother, reproachfully.

"Yes, mother," he said, with an impatient sigh, "I suppose so. Though she has so much spring—go—she's so altogether thoroughbred, that she might take up her end of the chain of matrimony, and even part of yours, and dance along with it, so that a man might scarcely feel his shackles—but she has to be caught first," he added, with a laugh at his own earnestness.

"Lesley is nothing if not uncommon," said

Lady Appuldurcombe, "and now she finds that all Lady Cranstoun has taught her about men, and which was new and stimulating in the country, is a common parrot-cry here in town, stale and cheap, she pauses to think, to ask herself if they really are such wretches, she taxes her own experience, and finally she goes to the Grosvenor, and gets every book of the new school that can be got!"

"And has she read them?" exclaimed Ronny, quickly. "What a pity! I wanted you to guard her against that."

"She read every one! Then she went back and said, 'I can't stand these books; I want a clean book, please.' And what do you think the librarian, a most charming and cultivated man, said, pointing to the pile? 'And every one of them written by women!' Lesley came home scarlet, and vowed she would not read another book till she got back to her father's library."

"And did she tell you what moral she deduced from the new school of fiction?"

" 'Auntie'," she said, " 'if half a dozen women think that by half a dozen books they're going to work a revolution in man's nature and habits—not one-millionth part of the men will ever read them—they're fools—what man always was, that he mostly will

be—and the only way we women can teach him anything is by example'."

"Yes," said Ronny, as his mother paused.

"I don't know if she would mind," said Lady Appuldurcombe, a little doubtfully, "what women say to one another, you know. Well, she says that all this nonsense makes her feel inclined to take the part of the men—that they are great big, strong, kind creatures, with all the faults of children who have never learned self-control, but she complains that her attitude is altering to women, and becoming a very bitter one. However, you must talk to her yourself; I can't remember half she says."

"Where is she this morning?" inquired Ronny.

"Gone to Whitechapel to see that man in Hospital whom Malincourt sent up. I wish she had not gone; she picks up all sorts of ideas about the poor, and she is growing positively shabby in her gloves and hasn't bought a new frock for a fortnight; but I can't ask her what she does with her own money. Do you know, Ronny, I think this visit will do her good, after all, and she will be delighted to settle down with her Bob in the country, at last!"

"Bob is not the man for her," said Ronny,

with much decision. "He will not check one of her faults, remove any of her prejudices, or train her mind in the least. I should say," he added with a smile, "that she was far more likely to teach Bob mischief, than that he should contribute to *her* improvement."

"No one will ever master Lesley," said Lady Appuldurcombe. "She is too much like you, Ronny, only she has not your cool head."

"Perhaps," said Ronny, "Bob tried it, and, not liking the process, ran away. But, no—she has too many faults to have come under a strong man's sway yet."

"Do you find her so faulty then?" cried his mother, delighted.

"She hasn't had an hour of discipline since she was born," he said. "That is really what makes her so delightful—that she is precisely as Nature in gracious mood made her, and no matter what she feels or thinks, out it comes, and it's nearly always right. But she will have to suffer a lot before she is a real woman, poor little soul," he added sadly.

"Not a bit of it," said Lady Appuldurcombe, vaguely uneasy at something in his tone, "she will marry Yelverton or Bob, and be happy all the days of her life. She may grieve because she has not a million or two to scatter broadcast on her idle poor, but

she'll manage to spend Malincourt's savings royally, never fear. Dear me! It's one o'clock, and I've a dozen notes to write before luncheon," she added; then—because she could never keep her hands off him for long together—smoothed her boy's hair, kissed his brown cheek most lovingly, and left him alone in the drawing-room to those meditations which, as it happened, he was not destined long to enjoy.

"Damn!"

It came out roundly, emphasized with a stamp of the foot, that brought Ronny to his feet out of the easy-chair in which he had been hidden, as Lesley, squeezing the door tight behind her, entered the room.

"Lesley!" he cried, in genuine horror, "did you really say that?"

"If I did not, who did?" she retorted with much effrontery, though her cheeks were flaming; "and I call it *mean* of you to keep out of sight like that—I always see that the door is shut when I say it here—I can't do more!"

"Lesley," he said gravely, "a cursing woman is a dreadful thing. Does Bob allow it?"

"Bob!" Her eyes, her voice painted such a mere nullity for Ronny's inspection, as naturally increased his contempt for that gentle-

man.

"Father doesn't mind," she said hardily; "and Bob *laughs*," she added, more and more angry with Ronny and herself.

"Then I shouldn't advise you to marry Bob," said Ronny, who looked even cooler than usual, as he stood by a stand of roses in the great shaded drawing-room; "you want discipline, not encouragement, Lesley in your wrong ways."

"Oh, you Prig!" cried Lesley, passionately. "Isn't it better to get rid of my grievances in one big word than to carry them round with me all day, sulking at everybody?"

"And pray what are your grievances?" said Ronny. "Why not remove one of them—your hat?"

"Oh!" cried Lesley, tears starting to her eyes, that she turned aside to hide, "I am tired and hot, and your London makes me wretched. After all, it *is* the punishment Dad intended!"

"And you have seemed so thoroughly happy!" he exclaimed. "Not one of us but has envied you your capacity for enjoyment."

"Well, it has run short," she said, "at first a London season in perfect summer weather attracted and dazzled me; but this life of hurry, of excitement, to be just in time for

this, just not too late for that—it is brutal, it is false to Nature who knows precisely how many heart-beats we're able to give, how much we can enjoy in any given time, and after a while, the heaped-up feast disgusts us, and we long to go hungry for a while—that is to say, we unsophisticated humans—the others try to goad themselves into appetites they cannot feel, and would be far better without! We have our failings in the country, I know, but wickedness is healthy there, it does not try to create a new sensation because all the old ones are exhausted; *here* it is morbid."

Ronny nodded. He had put her into an easy-chair, and was fanning her small flushed face, that was already somehow different to the one she had brought to town.

"You are like Malincourt,' he said, "you like the country life best, and you are right."

"Yes, I seem to want the pauses, to sit and watch the hyacinth bulbs sprouting in their tall glasses—this is a simile—and wait for the fragrance of the flowers, as our mothers and grandmothers did before us, and enjoy it when it does come. I do not love the 'bike,' I do not like women who talk like men—oh, you may raise your brows; that was not talking; it was an ejaculation!—I hate their books,

and least of all, Cousin Kilmurry, do I like the men!"

"I'm sure they're awfully good to you, Lesley."

"Yes, because I'm a pleasant little fool; but they are always on the alert, watching us as if we were new, strange animals; we are no longer something to be taken care of, and petted, but creatures who threaten their rights; no longer brothers and sisters united by a common bond of affection, but enemies, and very bitter enemies too! In point of fact, men are *sick* of us women, of what we do and say, what is written about us, even what we look, and for a time at least would like to see us swept off the face of the earth. Perhaps if we came back in three years' time they might be glad to see us—I'm not sure!"

"We are not tired of you," said Ronny; "only men are quiet, reticent creatures at heart, and we don't like so—so much noise!"

"But we are so many!" cried Lesley, "that is the cruel part of it, that we cannot all marry, and we hate to be drags on fathers and brothers, and so we try to work—and women *hate* work, and would much rather have a big kind fellow to take care of them—and out of all this upheaval one good will come—that a woman being no longer forced to take any

sort of man for the sake of a home, will be able to demand a higher standard of morality, while the man, finding that the best sort of woman is only to be won by deserving her, will——" she stopped herself, for Ronny had a quiet twinkle in his eye that she found extremely disconcerting. "Oh!" she cried indignantly, "that is how all you men look when women talk, and we are so deadly in earnest that we have no sense of humour, worse luck! And you may laugh, but the movement in the right direction will come from what women *do*, not what they write—from example, not denunciation. In time men will become ashamed of the mire on their boots, when following after the clean footprints of the women they love, and learn self-control——"

"And, by Heaven!' cried Ronny, "they want it!"

Lesley winced, and changed the subject.

"I think," she said, "that when a man writes bitterly and cruelly of women and their faults, he forgets his mother, or the one woman who would love him if he were a senseless log; and when a woman is hard on men, she doesn't think of her boys or her father—"

But here the luncheon bell rang, and Lesley, smoothing her hair as she took off her corn-flower hat, seemed to become once more

The Lovely Malincourt, without a care in the world, or a thought. He opened the door for her to pass out, then suddenly stopped her.

"Lesley, you haven't told me why you said —that?"

"My maid had been turning up her nose at my poor people," said Lesley ruefully; "she's of their class, and such a horrid little snob she doesn't even know it, so I rushed in here directly I got back and—exploded."

"But you musn't," said Ronny, as they went downstairs together. "When a woman begins to know what she wants, she usually wants a lot——"

"Oh, there you are Lesley!" said Lady Appuldurcombe in a tone of evident relief; "really I was beginning to think you had stayed in the East altogether!"

CHAPTER IX.

SIGHING, dying, languishing towards one man, as flowers at daybreak lean towards the sun, an audience, composed mainly of women, sat in one of the big drawing-rooms of a house in Lancaster Gate, and drank in the notes of his voice as he sang one of his own songs, which was of love, as most of his songs were.

The man really was a thoroughly good fellow, a splendid son, a staunch friend, and a born musician; but the crowd of women—not of the first order—who prostrated themselves before him, had begot in him a profound contempt for the whole sex, that showed in every line of his face, as his arrogant eyes—with that knack of rolling upwards, which made most men long to kick him—wandered over the silly, fluttering, adoring crowd spread out before him.

"It makes one's blood boil! Look at that girl—her very hairpins are falling out!" said Lesley, in a fierce aside to Roger Yelverton, whose black coat was the only one in the row

of chairs where they sat. "Such a man could not be, if woman had not made him what he is! Yet there is something warm, human, magnetic about him"—she spoke slowly, studying the singer very intently. "And if he got his hair cut, and didn't roll up his eyes"—she paused; then said, looking really tragic—"after all, I do believe there *is* a class of women who like being—kicked!"

"My dear!" said Lady Appuldurcombe, who, on her other side, had caught the words, and looked alarmed; for Lesley had been so good the last few days that a break-out in the wrong direction seemed to be inevitable.

"They're very rummy," said Yelverton, shaking his smooth, fair head. "Something in a man catches their vanity, or their fancy, or taste, and off they go—you can't stop 'em! But a man must give out somehow that he doesn't mind being adored—like this fellow—just as another man, without saying a word, refuses—like Ronny, now, for example. Where would *he* be, if, with all his fame, he—er—er——"

"Encouraged us?" said Lesley, drily. "But Ronny is not a lovable person. He has not large"—she extended her little hands in a sweep—"all-entrancing, grand ways. He does not roll his eyes, or make a point of saying, 'I

love you,' instead of 'How do you do?' to every woman he addresses"—she stopped to laugh. "He is one of your concentrated, deadly reticent, Brand's essence sort of person, is Ronny!"

"All the better for the woman he marries," said Roger, manfully, for he carried a very sore heart about him in those days, only occasionally healed over by such a happy position as he found himself in just now. "When a man like that *does* fall in love——"

"Ah! when?" said Lesley, gaily. "That will be when cap and pigskin have vanished off the face of the earth—not before! A little less than his horse, and dearer than his dog, you know!"

She spoke discreetly low, for Lady Appuldurcombe was on her other side, though just then in deep conversation with a distant relative —Mrs. Fane.

Roger Yelverton stole a glance at the girl's unconscious face as she sat beside him. He never could quite make up his mind whether he liked her best in her fresh morning gown of cambric, or her foamy ball gowns, or on Coquette—his two darlings, as in his heart he called them—or as she looked now, all in white, as usual, with brocaded sleeves of exactly the same colour as her wonderful eyes,

and "finished" with all those dainty little *minauderies* of a young girl's dress that are so grotesque on older women.

Her mouth had fallen into those curves that would have been petulant with a weaker character, and her round firm chin came boldly out a little in advance of the tip of her small, straight nose, that had the proudly-cut nostrils peculiar to brave, sensitive temperaments.

"Did you ever see such a room?" she said, glancing round at the pink satin panels, heavily encased in gilding, that decorated the walls, at the massive silver-gilt coffers and tables in the window; the mantel-board, also gilt, supporting ormolu candelabra, and more gilt monstrosities. "How thankful we ought to be that the hostess has not gilt the cut-glass chandeliers!"

"I am afraid of you," said Roger, laughing. "Do I not see Cynthia de Salis afar off?"

"Yes; isn't it horrid? We quite expected to sit together."

"You are great friends, you two," said Roger, with a certain wonder that he felt unable to hide.

"Yes; I—I'm educating her," said Lesley, turning a saucy young face round at him.

And so she was, though the name of Ronny

Kilmurry, save casually, was never even mentioned between them.

"She's years older than you are!' blurted out Roger, who often found it difficult to reconcile Lesley's distracting youth with the occasionally extreme agedness of her conversation.

"She is twenty-five; and she has wasted four whole years of her life, and shan't waste any more," said Lesley, enigmatically, though she often said to Yelverton things she never dreamed of saying to any one else. He was so safe, dependable; something like Bob, as men are like one another, much oftener than women are like women.

"Did you see her snub Ronny yesterday?" said Lesley, in great delight. "I never saw a man look so astonished in all my life! If only he had been taken in hand *earlier!*" and Lesley sighed, as if she had been bringing up men in the way they should go, ever since she was born.

"You're fearfully down on us poor devils," said Roger, with the air of having discovered something quite original, and greatly calculated to astonish her.

"When I have been married fifty years to one man, and he loves me as much as on the day he married me, in spite of tempers, and

fat—or lean—the loss of any charm I ever possessed, and all the thousand ills that flesh is heir to, I'll believe in a man's love, and not before," said Lesley, decidedly.

"There are plenty of men who would do that," said Roger, eagerly. "Nothing will ever rid you of your 'ways,' Miss Malincourt, or ——" but, in his excitement, he had raised his voice, and a soft "S—sh" here cut him short.

This conversation had by no means proceeded uninterruptedly, but in tags and scraps between the coming and going of those artists who divided with the composer the honours of the afternoon.

He was now on the platform, and all the women's heads and bodies were slanting one way towards him, as you will see a row of trees on the sea coast, much exposed to the fury of the gales, permanently forced out of the perpendicular for all time by the wind.

"There is immense vitality in that man," said Lesley, when he had thrown a last look of pity around, and the bent backs and vapouring faces were straightening themselves, with a long-drawn sigh. "Do you see how crisply his hair curls? Hair is an infallible guide to temperament."

"Then I've got none at all," said Roger, smoothing the top of his head, "for mine is

as straight as—as tallow candles, and much the same colour," he added ruefully.

"Is it nearly over?" said Lesley, looking round. "And don't you think that concerts, and—and loads of silver-gilt, are conducive to an extremely elevated style of conversation?"

On her other side, Lady Appuldurcombe was saying in ruffled , but extremely low accents, close to Mrs. Fane's ear—

"You got an entirely wrong account, my dear; it was not nearly so bad as her boxing the duke's ears, after all. Lesley was being literally stalked down by the man, who, for all his position, has no business at all in society. He has the reputation of forcing himself on any woman he admires, the more especially if she does not admire him, and he came up to Lesley the other night, and held out his hand, though she had already passed him without recognition. Everybody was looking, and scented mischief, because, as Ronny says, in the shocking slang of the day, 'She makes us all pull our socks up'; and when Lesley looked Dashwood straight in the eyes, and turned on her heel, people smiled; but he simply walked round, so as to intercept her, and said, 'Miss Malincourt, you have forgotten me; we met at the opera last night.' She

drew herself up, and said, 'I *decline* the honour of your acquaintance!' looking so tall she seemed to tower above him, though he is over six feet, and, though I saw she was trembling in every limb, she looked like Ronny does when he is roused, and nothing will move him. She was just turning to me, when the great bully came back, bringing his hostess, who said, with perfect unconsciousness of the situation, 'Miss Malincourt, permit me to introduce to you Sir Graham Dashwood.' Lesley had a big fan of crimson roses in her hand, and, for a moment, I thought she would have struck him across the face with it, she was so transported with anger; then, 'I have twice tonight refused the honour of this *man's* acquaintance,' she said, and all the women who had been run down and insulted by the brute —excuse me, my dear—looked as if they could have clapped their hands and kissed her!"

"And what did he do then?"

"Slunk away; and he will never be admitted to that house, and a good many others, again. But you will admit that it is rather—rather—for a *chaperone,* you know."

"Oh! very. But it's extraordinary how women like her, considering how wild the men are about her. I see she and Cynthia are great

friends. I hear some news about the latter. Is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"That she is going to take Onslow, at last; and she couldn't do better. He has been very patient."

"I only hope it may be true," said Lady Appuldurcombe slowly, but with a vague feeling of slight to Ronny, as if some one had filched from him a jewel he did not value, but yet was his.

"And I suppose that is a match, too?" said Mrs. Fane, looking at Lesley and Yelverton, who had the air of thoroughly good comrades as they talked together.

"Oh dear, no! There is a young man in the country," said Lady Appuldurcombe, in an absent-minded way, for she was asking herself, "Was this another of Miss Lesley's tricks?" And, if so, was she getting Cynthia out of the way because she wanted Ronny for herself. And Ronny? She knew that he had very decided views of what a young English maiden, strictly brought up, should be, and into the face of every one of his prejudices, great and small, Lesley flew.

CHAPTER X.

"You analyze far too much," said Cynthia; "you have everything — everything" — her voice was a little bitter—"take it and be happy; don't be always picking holes in it."

"And you are so drugged with the hasheesh of excitement upon which you have been literaly brought up, that you can't see things as they are," said Lesley, with a look that took away the sharpness of her words; "my eyes, my sensations are all brand-new, and I tell you that even at this moment, when you own I am enjoying myself under the trees, I can only think of Society as the Convict Ship. Do you know those lines—

> 'All gladness and glory to wandering eyes,
> Yet chartered with sorrow, and freighted with sighs,
> Fading and false is the aspect it wears,
> Like the smiles we put on just to cover our tears.'"

"Tears!" exclaimed Cynthia, turning to look at the vision of triumphant youth and loveliness beside her, dressed by Rouff; "much you have to do with tears! *They* are

for your victims."

"And I tell you, Cynthia, I've got into a way of counting up the moments out of the eighteen hours in each twenty-four that I tread the mill-round of pleasure, in which I really enjoy myself, and sometimes I don't get five minutes of real enjoyment, though I'm putting in quite an hour with you this morning!"

It was early yet, the Park was at its freshest; they had found two seats in a quiet corner, within sight of, but removed from the busy rout, and Lesley, who in a mob of female acquaintances had no intimates, felt thoroughly happy in the company of the only woman to whom she had taken in town.

"And pray, what have you to complain of?" inquired Cynthia, rather drily.

"Of the crowds, for one thing," replied Lesley, promptly, "the pushing, striving, noisy crowds, each person a humming-top and believing he represents the universe; of the raw waste of new ideas that fill the air like a snow-storm, and which no one has time to weld into snowballs with which to demolish a real abuse or fallacy; of the abominable cleverness of these swarming women-writers, and the total absence of a single real genius among them all——"

"Oh, stop!" cried Cynthia, putting her hands to her ears.

"And if they would all promise not to write a line for years and years, and stop talking altogether," concluded Lesley, with trenchant emphasis, "they would have time to think, and perhaps learn something; at present each one is trying to teach, and nobody listens, and man, the brute, with his tongue in his cheek, *laughs.*"

"You have less reason than any one I know to be so hard on men, Lesley," cried Cynthia, warmly. "Lady Cranstoun had no right to graft her own mistakes on your young life, to thwart all your natural feelings with her own worldly wisdom. I could understand your being hard on women—which you are not, since it is from a woman you have experienced harm, not a man."

Lesley did not flash out under the reproof as she would once have done, for though she loved her friend as much as ever, she had come to realize that Lady Appuldurcombe was right and Lady Cranstoun wrong; for that no amount of evil-doing in a man could excuse his wife in taking a leaf out of his book, and doing evil also, thereby reducing herself to his level, and depriving herself of even the right to blame him. And Lesley had

also come to know that a class of men existed whose standard of conduct was almost as high as the purest woman's, and in the teeth, too, of temptations that no woman need undergo, unless she directly challenges them. She must bring temptation to her own hearth; but the man's steps are pursued by it wherever he goes, and he is often as much sinned against as sinning.

"And yet," she said slowly, "who shall say when one sees a Graham Dashwood or a Count Kinski that Lady Cranstoun is not, from her point of view, right? I hope," she broke out suddenly, "that I may never, never know what love means. A man teaches a woman passion, he rouses her whole nature, makes love necessary to her; then for some little thing that displeases him in her, walks away, and begins to teach some other woman! And what is the poor left-behind to do? It is not every woman whose will-power is stronger than her heart; though I think mine would be, if it ever came to a tussle between them."

"I think," said Cynthia, with a little hesitation that covered some very real eagerness, "that you are fonder of Bob than you suppose, that he has a niche in your heart all to himself. Your open predilection for Roger Yelverton's society is of quite another kind."

"Bob is not good for me," said Lesley, candidly. "I want licking into shape, and Bob will never do it; he'd encourage me to go all to pieces first, and then I should round on him, and there would be confusion. You know, Cynthia, that there are men who look at you so that you're ashamed of being a woman—I don't mean poor Bob—and there are others one feels instinctively one would like to be governed by; for it is the very wine of life to be mastered in the right way. A woman never really submits to a man till he has mastered her, and both know it! Physical strength, intellectual supremacy, go for very little with me; but I bow my knee to the man who has moral courage, for it is there that men so conspicuously fail, while women are so strong in it."

Cynthia did not speak, but her face as plainly as possible flouted women, and said, "Ronny."

"Oh, I don't know," cried Lesley, answering the thought instantly; "it may be only coldness, or profound disapproval of the present race of women; every man is at heart a foe, only some of them have the grace to be polite over it, like Ronny!"

"Ronny certainly does not encourage women," began Cynthia, who was absolutely

wooden-headed on one point, as is the way of those women without much imagination, with whom their affections are passions, and their passions life itself.

"And you mean that I encourage men? that he is honourable, I am dishonourable?" cried Lesley, tartly, but feeling that nothing could spoil her sense of content in the coolness around, in the delight of seeing the world go by at a distance, instead of being jostled at every turn.

"You can't help it, Lesley," said Cynthia—"men liking you, I mean—but it would be very easy for Ronny to let women love him, only he won't; and there is just that difference between you."

"I used to think it was good discipline for them," said Lesley, looking troubled; "but I'm not so sure now. It is not *all* vanity and greediness with them, if only they would not say much the same things in the same way! Bob and Roger Yelverton might be brothers, except for their looks. Heigho! only a fortnight more of the hollow show, then hey for Malincourt!"

"And Bob," said Cynthia, softly.

Lesley's face lengthened, then she laughed. "I shall tell him I have fallen in love," she said; "there will be no one to disprove it!

And if he still ventures to disbelieve me, I will get Dad to ask down Roger Yelverton, and flirt with *him*."

"Poor Roger!" said Cynthia, rather wearily, as they got up and turned Grosvenor Placewards for luncheon. She felt sure Ronny had seen them in the distance, and had hoped he would join them.

CHAPTER XI.

Two young people, both victims to primitive habits of early rising—now discontinued—quite independently discovered that four walls were intolerable when a glorious summer morning beckoned them abroad to rejoice in its crystal freshness; but a woman, being always quicker at following out her ideas than a man, it happened that Lesley got to Lady Appuldurcombe's front door first, and unbarred it, and slipped forth, about twenty seconds before Ronny appeared on the scene.

He blamed Charville, or Charville's young gentlemen, for the unfastened door, until to his surprise, he saw Lesley's tall figure marching ahead of him, and, at that moment, turning, with a business-like air, in at Stanhope Gate.

He hesitated, and almost turned back. Where was she going? What had she, now, in her mind? A tryst to keep—a prank to play? But no—he remembered the quivering scorn in her face when she had repeated that accu-

sation of his of "slipping off" with Yelverton.

If he had thought so, he would have gone the other way, for he was not Lesley's keeper, and, if she did look back and see him, pray was not the park free to all?

She was more plainly dressed than usual, he thought, and, certainly, her brown holland gown had all the merit—and costliness—of extreme simplicity, so had her coarse straw hat, with its white ribbon bow. It was the way that hat and holland gown were carried that satisfied Ronny's fastidious taste as he walked at ease behind them, for it was one of his standing quarrels with the human race, that it did not know how to walk, and would never learn, while there is scarcely an animal that does not know how to use its limbs gracefully and well.

Lesley threw up her head, now and then, to sniff the air her elastic step indicating boundless content within; and the few poor people they met looked at her wistfully, as at some young goddess of youth and health. And to one she gave a bright morning greeting, to another money, perhaps to others hope—who can tell? Presently, she turned out of the but lately-opened gates, and stood, hesitating, in Piccadilly.

"Covent Garden, miss?" said the burly

policeman she addressed. "Straight down through Piccadilly and Leicester Square, turn to your right, then to your left, and there you are."

When she had smiled, and thanked him, Bobby stood looking after her; and he, too, smiled. Even his hideous dress and office could not quite cut him off from manly emotions, and he was aware that, quite early in the day, he had got a most especial treat—and enjoyed it.

He touched his hat when Ronny passed him, for Ronny was extremely well known; but the look of pleasure diminished on his face, and, as a man, he felt resentful, for he did not consider Ronny good enough for the young lady.

"They're rum 'uns, these aristocrats," he soliloquized, as he watched what he supposed to be the sweethearts' disappearance in the distance. "Covent Garden at this time of the morning, when they might lie snug in their beds! And I will say that blue eyes and raven hair, with a colour like a rose, is my fancy; and a walk so as she'd go over cobblestones as if they was satin!" he added, thinking that, if that were *his* sweetheart, he would not tail behind, but step out brisk beside her.

And then he thought of his fat, sandy

haired old woman at home, and sighed.

Half-way down Piccadilly, Lesley's shoestring came untied, and, as she stopped to tie it, resting her foot on a doorstep, Ronny stepped forward, and performed the task for her.

She started very slightly, and, looking down on him as he knelt, with a face full of delicious mirth and mischief, said—

"Don't be alarmed! Naught is never in danger."

"May I come with you?" said Ronny, when he had rubbed the dust from his knees, and straightened himself. "I heard you tell the policeman where you were going."

"You must know," said Lesley, keeping swift step with him, as a man likes every woman to do, but only a tall woman can, "Dad said to me, 'There's only one thing worth seeing in London, and thats' Covent Garden Market before people are awake. You get a real smell of the country there, and a breath of the earth.' So here I am. What will auntie say?" and she turned a look of mischief on Ronny, at which he laughed and shook his head. "But with the good, the filial, the respectable Ronny beside me, who could possibly say *anything?*"

"That's all right, then," said Ronny, cheer-

ily, "if we meet any one we know."

"As if any of them would be up," said Lesley, looking disdainfully at the Army and Navy Club, which they were then passing. "Doesn't it smell of stale sleep? And, after all, I don't see why the poor—who get little else—shouldn't have the delicious early morning hours to themselves. It *must* soothe their starved hearts, and do them good, even if they don't know it. Don't you think so, Ronny?"

"It strikes me the poor get a lot of pity they don't deserve," said Ronny, who was a Conservative to the backbone, and who did not, like some Conservatives, talk like a half-penny Radical paper. "The worst of these poor is that they won't work; they'll knock up over tasks that you or I would do without flinching, if we had *got* to do them."

"That is where our training comes in," cried Lesley. "The head helps the hands; but those poor wretches, who slink painfully along from birth to burial, they *can* be taught by our trying to make their lives *happier*. Oh, Ronny! at the Savoy the other night, after dinner, I stood on the balcony, and saw the dark figures far below on the embankment, and the black river beyond, and I thought of what might be, if only the people who have

too much money would help those who have too little!"

"And what would you do?" said Ronny, as they crossed the deserted circus, that looked strangely unfamiliar under that clear, pure, morning sky.

"I would light up the embankment brilliantly from end to end. Think of that beautiful background of trees and picturesque houses, the most beautiful site in Europe for a people's playground! I would have a *cafe chantant* at intervals under those trees, with seats where people could rest and listen; and there should be stalls and books, and every man should have his *bock,* and every woman her lemonade or coffee; and the poorest of all should be there, and the children who were big enough should come, too!"

"The weather?" said Ronny, concisely.

"But it does not rain right through the summer, I would draw the men out of the public-houses, the poor, tired women out of their stifling dens; and they should all have a few hours of peace in the open air, with such music as pleased them, and they would go home refreshed to sleep, not to wrangle and fight, as they do now. I would do the same with Hyde Park, and any other green space that was meant just as much for the enjoy-

ment of the poor as the rich!"

Ronny shook his head.

"It would never answer," he said.

"Oh! why not?" cried Lesley, passionately. "Were *all* the pleasures in the world, even pure air, made solely for the rich? I think it is immoral—it is horrible!—that one man may own twenty millions of money, and another has to commit a crime to keep the life in his miserable body! And if I were wealthy!" cried the girl, indignantly, "I'd be a spendthrift! It's the spendthrifts who are the real friends of the poor. Some of their money filters through to the very lowest classes; and, even if he does ruin himself, the prodigal has done more good than the man who never touches the bulk of his money, but hands it on to his son, and generation after generation, that money is simply accumulating, and does not help to save one soul alive!"

"Lesley!" said Ronny, stopping short to look at her. "And you call yourself a Conservative?"

"I call myself a woman," said Lesley. "Oh! how could one be happy, to have millions that one never touched, and know little children were starving and perishing one little mile away? And if they drink, these poor wretches! it's because the burden of life so

beats them down, that, at any price, they want to forget it. 'Show me a drunkard,' a doctor said once, 'and I'll show you the history of a broken heart.' And it is true. They do not love the drink; but they want to reach a nerve far down, and deaden it. When that nerve is touched and stupefied, they can rest. It is in a coarser way what a woman who has wanted love badly, and missed it, feels. There is the ache, the want; and it is in trying to find and kill that nerve, that such desperate deeds are done. And so I say, give the poor food, air, light, sweet music—anything that will help to satisfy that want; and, if I were Queen but for one day, Ronny, they should have them all!"

He saw that she was trembling, and in the strenuous young face turned upon him was something spiritual that fairly startled him. Lesley with a soul! Lesley the elusive, who had barely seemed to possess a heart!

"What makes you think of all these things, Lesley?" he said, with an effort.

"Do I go down often to the East, keeping my eyes shut? Dad is right, and this splendid city of yours is a cruel place!"

"It is," said Ronny, sorrowfully. "The nearer you get to civilization, the more corrupt human nature becomes, the further from

God. It is only among savages that the primitive virtues exist; and there you will find the humble flower of modesty in woman, of clean living in man, and many nobler qualities unknown here in the spirit, though outwardly observed in the letter to save appearances."

They had both stopped, and, in the middle of Leicester Square, stood looking earnestly at each other, and neither saw a man in stale evening dress, with crumpled tie, who leaned far out of his hansom as he passed, as if to make quite sure of their identity.

"So you box my ears, madam, do you, and walk in Leicester Square at half-past six in the morning," he muttered, furiously; "and there is no need to say you were with your cousin, Kilmurry; some other name will go better with the story!"

Smiling, he lifted his evil, sodden face—one ugly, long misrecord of his life—to the fair morning sky, and the horrible contrast that the debased human makes to Nature, struck even upon the comprehension of a workingman, who was passing by, and made him thank God he was not a "bloomin' haristocrat."

"I can *smell* Covent Garden!" cried Lesley, joyously, five minutes later.

"So can I," said Ronny, ruefully, who knew

some of Covent Garden's little ways, and was wondering which of its smells, various as those of Cologne, they could most successfully avoid.

CHAPTER XII.

"Lesley," said Ronny, as she stood by the open drawing-room window pulling on her gloves, and waiting for the coach to come round, "have you been a good girl lately?"

"And pray, can you think of such a trifle as my language when you are going to ride your first race after nearly a year, this afternoon?"

"Answer my question. *Have* you been good?"

Lesley, tilted her straight little nose impertinently, and made no reply.

"Don't you think," he said calmly, "that, instead of improving the poor, it's about time you began to improve yourself? And instead of being so tender to *their* feelings—display a little humanity to the poor wretches chained to the Juggernaut of your vanity and love of admiration?"

"My vanity!"

Lesley gasped—real beauty is never vain, and there was outraged majesty in her air as she drew up her tall slender figure—and

turned her back on him. "And pray, what have I done *now?*" she said indignantly.

He ran over a list of men's names—but her indictment was in the last of them—Roger Yelverton.

"Is the schoolmaster abroad today?" inquired Lesley, in a voice, and it was one of her greatest charms, fresh as the babble of a brook that tells some, but not all of its secrets.

"Time is getting short," he said, "and I don't see that you've got very far in the good character you promised to take home with you."

"Thank you, Ronny," said Lesley, with a flash of the eyes whose colour almost matched a Cloisonne plate on the wall behind her; "anyway, I'll take care not to bring it to you for annotation."

"You are counting the days to get home," he said, with an unusual crossness in his voice; "but if your hurry's on account of Bob —I'll forgive you."

"*You* forgive me!" cried Lesley, lifting her proud glance only to be angered by finding it droop before his, "but I *shall* be glad to get home—and I'll tell you why. Tattersall's—the opera—Ranelagh—the play—the intoxication of life as one sees it from a coach going

through the seething streets of Town—the balls, the music—I enjoy them all because they are things—not people—but not one person out of a hundred here pleases me at all!"

"Are we so hateful?" inquired Ronny, with some irritation.

"No; but the only happy people—and we have some conspicuous examples of this in our class—are those who keep out of society, or who just touch, without mingling with it! Your society, Ronny, makes a good savoury—but an uncommonly bad meal!"

"It is all false—rotten," said Ronny slowly; "but how did you find it out, child? To look at you, especially abroad, one would suppose that the true inwardness of things never struck you—that you were a butterfly, bent solely on enjoying your little day."

"But indeed it does," said Lesley, gravely. "That is why I am so fond of Cynthia. She doesn't try to throw off herself in excitement, in morphia, in an insane love of dress, in flirtation, those women are such fools to think they've eluded themselves; let them go in and out of the maze as they will, their souls will be waiting for them at the only egress!"

Ronny had moved away at Cynthia's unwelcome name, but now he returned, and with

something shining down the coldness of his grey eyes, yet without passion, without covetousness, looked at the girl.

"I'm glad you feel like that, Lesley," he said, "it will be all the better for—Bob. Have you a photograph of him?" he added abruptly.

"No."

"And yet you must have liked him," he said, keenly aware of the inconvenience of the moment for such a discussion, yet hurried on by some force of which he was not master, "to actually be—be engaged to him."

"Oh!" said Lesley, airily, "it is one of the most rooted, the most *respectable* instincts of the average woman, be she peasant or princess, that she must have a man to walk out with—if not her own, then some other woman's—but still, a man! Once you eradicate that instinct, your last shred of power over us is gone! Here's the coach!" And in less than ten minutes they had started on their way to Sandown.

In the paddock Lesley came across Count Kinski in deep confab with Graham Dashwood, and as they both turned to look with covert insolence at her, something like a little chill wind seemed to pass over the girl, though, answering Roger's glance of quick concern, she said—

"It is nothing—only some one stepping over my grave."

"And some people will get a jolly good kicking if they don't alter their manners," muttered Roger, looking back menacingly at the couple of worthies who were smiling disagreeably as their eyes followed Lesley's back.

But she had thrown off her presentiment by now, and was taking the liveliest interest in the smart crowd, and all those exciting details that go to make up the pungent atmosphere of a race-meeting, and seem peculiar to the neighbourhood of a horse, and even if Lesley had not loved horses, the stir, the hum, the brisk bustle in the air would have exhilarated her, but, as it was, she enjoyed herself with more thoroughness than she had at any time done since she arrived in town.

Perhaps the knowledge that her grey coat, with its white silk facings, and big, mother-o' pearl buttons, was the finest tailor's inspiration there, conduced considerably to her sense of well-being; but Cynthia, who also had a foreboding, as she followed with Onslow, could not help asking herself what possible chance any woman could have against her?

"Regular clipper, ain't she?" asked Hughie Onslow, as if he guessed Cynthia's thoughts.

"Pity she boxes men's ears, though—Kinski's an ugly customer to tackle; and Dashwood's another—they'll move Heaven and earth to be even with her yet!"

"Men are divided into two classes," said Cynthia, who was looking delicious herself, in her cool, transparent green draperies; "nice and nasty. When they're nasty, they rouse something in Miss Malincourt akin to what you men feel when you see a brute ill-treating a child—and, of course, all the nasty people loathe her—the nice *love* her."

"You're great friends, I know," he said, slowly, much as if he were propounding a riddle, without any idea of what was the answer.

He felt sure it was Lesley who had procured for him a few kind looks from the quarter where he was used to receiving only averted ones; and he knew, as all their set did know, that it was Ronny—Ronny, the indifferent—who, without an effort, barred all the other fellows' chances with Cynthia. And could not any blind bat see how things were between the lovely Malincourt and her cousin? Wherefore did he find Cynthia's love for Lesley a riddle hard to read.

"I think a man's racing colours are to him what a ball-gown is to a woman," said Lesley,

as, having regained the coach, they watched the horses take their leisurely way to the starting-place, "and how *well* Ronny looks in his jacket!" she added, looking at him through Yelverton's field-glasses, the white feathers in her hat tickling his nose.

"He'll look better in the saddle," said Yelverton magnanimously, and with an intense longing to kiss the little grey Swedish glove lifted to so very near his lips, as it held his glasses. "Of course, this is mere child's play to Kilmurry—and doesn't mean any serious riding at all—but to see him pull off a really big thing against all the professionals, is just rippin'! I should say his wife—if he ever marries—will have her heart in her mouth pretty often!" concluded Roger.

"He has had bad falls?" said Lesley, intently watching the starter, who was not having a rosy time—when he does, the millennium will have arrived.

"I should say," said Relverton, "he had broken about every bone in his body that can be broken—except his neck. They're off!" he added abruptly, and leaned forward, as in the scarcely broken line of mingled colours on the riders' backs, the five horses swept forward, immediately to spread out fanwise over the field.

Neither Cynthia's nor Lesley's strained gaze left the striped azure and white cap and jacket; but Lesley could appreciate, as the other could not, the perfection of that mastery of his horse which had made Ronald Kilmurry what he was—the first gentleman rider, probably, in the whole world.

As he passed the winning-post a shout of admiration broke from the crowd; and Lesley thrilled, for this was real, and she could see and hear it. But South Africa, with all its glorious deeds, was far away, and she could never quite see them, since he would not say one word to give them verisimilitude.

"Thank God that's safely over!" said Cynthia; then caught Hughie's intent gaze, and asked herself how it was possible to obey Lesley's orders, and seem to encourage this obstinately faithful, uninteresting young man, who was no more to her than any dry stick?

Lesley had carefully studied him before giving Cynthia this advice, and cruelly come to the conclusion that he was of that hardy sort which love does not kill, but over-eating may, and that if Cynthia flirted with him a little, it would not really hurt him, while her conduct might have a distinctly salutary effect on Ronny—if he were governed by the

ordinary rules of man, primitive or otherwise.

"Oh, auntie!" cried out Lesley, to Lady Appuldurcombe, who at the back of the coach, was a little pale—she always was when Ronny rode; "didn't he do it splendidly?"

"Of course, my dear! But there was so very little to do."

Her voice and manner were cold; and now that the excitement of the race was over, she was able to revert to a distinct annoyance just then present in her mind.

Why were some of the men, and a few of the women, emphatically the "nasty" ones, whom Lesley could not endure near her, smiling in that odd, disagreeable way when they looked at her? Had Lesley—the poor lady squirmed inwardly—been up to some new and compromising, if innocent trick, that she did not know?

For Lady Appuldurcombe had never heard of that early morning walk in Covent Garden—it would have involved explanations and inquiries as to the absence of Lesley's maid—and, like most men, Ronny hated explanations of any kind, and went out of his way to avoid them.

When he got away from his friends and the weighing-room, he made straight for Yel-

verton's coach, without changing his clothes, and as he drew nearer, something eager and almost boyish, showed in his usually quiet, reserved face; and when he was quite near, a sunshiny smile, as if irresistibly, broke over it.

He did not see his pale mother, he did not see Cynthia. He saw no one but a girl in a grey coat, who leaned eagerly down towards him, as he swung himself on to the wheel below, and looked up in her eyes.

"Well, Lesley?" he said, either careless or ignorant of what his face told; but before Leslie's eyes could answer him, a cry from the back of the coach startled her, and she looked round to see that Cynthia had fainted.

CHAPTER XIII.

No one who does not wish his social pretensions found out should venture into the park on a Sunday morning, between the hours of twelve and two. The proportion of nobodies to somebodies is that of a thousand to one, and the undesirable acquaintances will crowd upon the ambitious one thick as leaves in Vallambrosa, while the minor circle of great ones, all more or less closely *lies*, will serenely dawdle between Grosvenor and Stanhope Gates, a freshet of pure water, as they imagine, dividing a very Red Sea of counter-jumpers and suburban hostesses.

Lady Appuldurcombe's dictum, that it was quite impossible to miss anybody you wanted to see on a Sunday morning, if you kept within sight of Park Lane, seemed about correct, as, with Lesley on one side, and Ronny on the other, she walked under the trees, that, thanks to the wet summer, had kept their pleasant green longer than usual this year.

The smiles that greeted her on all sides from her intimates only threw into greater re-

lief the coldness of the glances cast on Lesley, and the spiteful ones of those younger and disappointed women who have not known how to attract and keep men's love, and who ultimately go to swell the great army of unwomanly persecutors of their own sex, that is one of the crying disgraces and shames of the day.

They are all sisters—they should help one another, not strive with cruel hands thrust human hearts down; but until true Christianity is practiced more than it is preached, and woman becomes the chief friend of woman, so long will men look on aghast at the barbarities inflicted by the so-called gentler sex on each other in the name of Virtue, though Spite would be a truer word.

Lesley endured the small cuts administered to her with no diminution whatever in her usual air of irrepressible youth, for the simple reason that she did not observe them, being really much exercised in her mind about Cynthia, whose sudden illness yesterday had alarmed and troubled her.

What had she done that Cynthia should wildly push her away when she went to her side, and barely say "good-bye" when they set her down, still white and trembling, at the house in Grosvenor Place?

Cynthia could not be angry, surely, because Ronny had come to his cousin first to be congratulated. And then Lesley uttered an exclamation of pleasure, for there, just beside the low rail, was Cynthia, sitting by her mother, so exquisitely dressed, that few people would pause to notice the dullness of her usually creamy skin, or the lifeless look in her warm, red-brown eyes; it is, indeed, almost impossible to look really wretched when one is thoroughly well turned out.

Lesley skipped over the railing, and, saluting Lady de Salis, looked about for a chair, which Ronny, after some search, found, while Lady Appuldurcombe, absorbed by some friends, disappeared, and Ronny, finding himself one too many, also beat a retreat, so that the girls were virtually alone.

"You are better, Cynthia?" she said, with that rare tenderness in her voice, which apparently only a woman has power to call forth, since no man had ever heard it.

For a moment the dark eyes, pride covering their anguish, looked into the loyal blue ones, searching what was there; then, with a strange quiver in her face, Cynthia said—

"I am quite—quite well."

"It was the heat," said Lesley, with conviction, for her conscience accused her not at

all.

She was leaning her chin on her hand, elbow on knee, her wide white skirts of *chiffon* spreading out snowily around her, the little face serious under the broad, white hat, for she knew Cynthia was suffering acutely, and Lesley wanted to know the reason why.

Many people looked at the beautiful pair, while Lady de Salis saw enough in some of the glances thrown on her daughter's friend to make her vaguely uneasy—as if she had not had trouble enough on Cynthia's account before!

Cynthia's mother was stout, and in bad health, and this nonsense about Ronny had lasted quite long enough, and Onslow was a good match, if only Cynthia would take him! If Kilmurry meant to marry his cousin, why need Cynthia let the whole world—or *her* world—see that her heart was broken over the business?

And while she asked herself this question, a scrap of conversation floated to her ear.

"Rapid? Rather! Carried on like steam with Yelverton—but he didn't see it—gave her the mare, and cried quits. And haven't you heard? Seen at all hours of the morning, in an absolutely disgraceful neighbourhood —with some man"—the voice dropped. "No

one seems to know who he is, but——"

Lady de Salis turned abruptly, and looked, first at the speaker, one of the deadliest scandal-mongers in town, and then at his companion, a woman, equally famous for retailing evil tidings, with additions.

The man looked foolish, after the manner of men; the woman smiled. She had an old score to settle with Lady de Salis, and meant to be even with her yet.

And, as ill-luck would have it, at no great distance, Ronny, walking homewards with Yelverton, was overhearing much the same story from the lips of Graham Dashwood, who, with another man, happened to be strolling just before them.

"Yes," he was saying, in the deliberate, slightly raised tones of one who wishes all the world to hear him, "unless I had seen it with my own eyes, I wouldn't have believed it. Some country Johnnie, I imagine—probably the fellow about whom there was such a scandal in Somersetshire that her father had to get her out of the way—to which accident we were indebted for The Lovely Malincourt's very unexpected——"

But the unexpected arrived to himself, for, wrenching himself out of Roger's detaining grasp, Ronny stepped lightly in front of the

slanderer, and struck him full across the mouth with his cane.

"You liar!" he said, between his teeth, his eyes blazing in the hard-set whiteness of his face; then, turning to Roger, he said, with perfect self control—

"You'll act for me, Yelverton?" lifted his hat, and walked slowly away.

The whole incident had not occupied ten seconds; and but for the blood on Dashwood's lips, the startled passers-by might have doubted their senses as to whether the *fracas* had really taken place at all, the more especially as no crowd had formed; the witnesses were of that order which makes a *detour,* rather than linger over a painful scene, and when Dashwood had wiped the blood from his lips, and turned to his friend, the three men were practically alone.

"You will act for me, Severn?" he said.

"I decline," said Severn, curtly; and, lifting his hat, walked away.

"I shall be at the Carlton from now until seven," said Yelverton, formally, to Dashwood.

Then he, too, bowed and turned on his heel; and Dashwood, his handkerchief to his cut lips, his livid face showing above it, got him-

self across the drive, and so into a hansom, and away.

CHAPTER XIV.

At luncheon, Lesley, being ill at ease, was flippant; and Ronny, in high spirits, encouraged her.

"Marriage," she announced, when Charville had withdrawn to the elegant leisure of the housekeeper's room—he only graced the servants' hall on occasion, as a bishop does a confirmation, for example—"means four walls and ordering legs of mutton—with varieties, if you are rich—and half-legs, without the variations, if you are poor. And that's a woman's life."

"Why not try a savoury omelette sometimes?" inquired Ronny; "or a *hors d'oeuvre?*"

"Yes—but if one occasionally varied the matrimonial joint in that way, one might come to miss, and want the savoury every day!"

"Lesley!" exclaimed Lady Appuldurcombe, reprovingly, being by no means in the best of spirits herself.

"I beg your pardon, auntie; but it's what

lots of women feel—the everlasting joint of married happiness, I mean, just as she gets sick of ordering the others for dinner. Of course, if you have a housekeeper—but then you've got to *eat* it, all the same!"

Ronny was laughing, and his mother shot at him a glance that began in anger, but wavered—like a slap to a naughty child, that is so much harder in intention than reality.

"It is too bad of you to draw Lesley on as you do," she said vexedly; and Ronny glancing at his mother, wondered if she had heard anything that morning; but no, she was eating her *salmi* of chicken too contentedly for that.

"It's very wicked to be lively, I know," said Lesey, pushing the dark rings of hair back from her low, wide forehead; "but I've tried being dignified, and it's a hopeless failure. There are too many dignified, well-behaved people going about the world already!"

"And not half enough bright ones, like you, Lesley," said Ronny; but Lady Appuldurcombe sighed. She could suffer any amount of bores gladly, but this unknown quantity, Lesley, was a sore trial; and Ronny's face yesterday, at Sandown, had been a revelation to her—though, if he had been guilty of such self-betrayal, most assuredly

he had regained complete control of himself today, and evidently meant to keep it.

"And what are you going to do this afternoon, Lesley?" said Ronny presently, and thinking, as he looked round the pleasant dining-room, cool under its awnings, that this might be the last Sunday the three would sit at table together again, either there or elsewhere.

"That's a secret," said Lesley, shaking out her skirts, and pinning a bunch of yellow Banksia roses, filched off the table, into her belt. "I have a very particular appointment abroad this afternoon—but this time not to Covent Garden."

She dropped her voice a little, but Lady Appuldurcombe's graceful mauve and black draperies had already passed through the doorway, and they were alone.

"May I escort you, then?"

She looked up, and their eyes met.

"No, Ronny, not today."

It struck her suddenly how true, how honest, his grey eyes were, with something better behind, like the sun breaking through clouds —what was it?

"Oh! Ronny," she cried, speaking her thoughts out, as she always did, "you Scotch, how deep you are—how sincere—how strong!

You are cautious, you are cold, you are *dour;* but if one can only pierce the hardness, you are——" her eyes were searching his all the while, and now the word she was looking for, came with what she found there, but remained unspoken. " 'For dark, and true, and tender is the north!' " she said below her breath. "You see I know all your old songs, Ronny!" And she laughed as she turned about to go, but the laugh did not ring true; and for one blinding moment the impulse was fierce upon him to snatch her in his arms and cry—

"I love you, Lesley—wild, sweet, wayward Lesley—but it is not for your loveliness I love you, but for your heart of gold, for your noble nature—because I *must!*" But he thrust the longing down, and let her go, for who but a coward would ask a girl to love what might be a dead man before many hours were over?

And yet to hold her in his arms but once, to kiss the little passionate mouth that had said such hard, such bitter things to him often, that could say such lovely true ones when it so pleased . . . long he stood battling with the temptation, and then, to put an end to it, seized his hat and went round to his club.

Lesley was not long behind him, followed by the maid, upon whom Lady Appuldurcombe insisted, and who, in fact, had never

been evaded, save on that fatal morning when Covent Garden Market had appeared before Lesley's eyes as a delectable vision, to be instantly exchanged, as most of her whims, occasionally to her sorrow, were, for dull reality!

She was not going far, and as she went past the flower-beds, that would reach their apogee of sumptuous bloom when everybody, except a few toiling millions, would be out of town, she thought of Ronny, and of how he had looked just now; and she was used to that look on men's faces, and had valued it very lightly, but this was—different.

Ronny loved her, and all the disjointed bits of her woman's heart fell into place, into harmony; she had found the philosopher's stone, and lo! it was beautiful exceedingly.

"Many waters will not quench love!" and some glimmer of the deathlessness, the steadfastness, the stupendous force of what a strong man's love might be, ay, and its sweetness, came to her like a revelation, and involuntarily she stopped in her walk, all the womanhood in her shrinking before the virility, the dogged strength of what she had surprised in Ronny's face just now—in Ronny her cold schoolmaster, and accuser!

The moment of fear passed, and her brave

spirit rose to meet, to exult in the great honour done her. It was characteristic of her that she did not go down on the knees of her heart and thank God for the joy it had brought her; but perhaps that would come later—and then, with a sudden shock of pain, she remembered Cynthia—Cynthia to whom she was going, whom she was pledged to help to win Ronny; Cynthia, to whom love was life indeed, while to herself, had she even dimly seen the wonder of its divine face?

"Not Bob," she said to herself, under her breath, "not Yelverton, not one of them—but when I do find him, I will go to him like a bird, rich or poor, high or low; and if it be Ronny, Cynthia shall not stay me, no, nor any other woman, for go to him I must—but *is* it Ronny?"

She scarcely knew how she found herself at the door of the house in Grosvenor Place, and when she had rung, was seized with a wild impulse to turn and run back to Park Lane, after her maid, as fast as she could go.

"Miss de Salis was at home, and in her boudoir. Would Miss Malincourt be pleased to step up?"

CHAPTER XV.

Cynthia was standing by the window, looking at those delightful palace grounds, that no one ever seems to enjoy but once in a way —at a Royal garden party, for instance— and she did not turn her head as Lesley came in, Lesley who, for once, was tongue-tied, and did not immediately speak. Slowly she took out the long pins from her feathery white hat, and threw it on the orange brocade sofa —the room was all yellow and orange, for Cynthia was a sun worshipper—then set her little teeth hard, and going up to Cynthia, touched her on the shoulder.

Cynthia knew the touch, turned and looked at Lesley, with hate and jealousy in the eyes that had been so friendly when, hardly twenty-four hours ago, they had started on the coach together for Sandown.

Lesley's hand dropped to her side, and, for a few moments, neither spoke.

"He loves you!" said Cynthia, in a cruel voice, "as you can make any man you please love you. You have had so much practice.

You could not even let *him* alone—my all, my idol!—who might have turned to me at last, when he saw how faithless, how selfish, other women were; and now——"

She threw up her arms with a despairing gesture, and the wide sleeves of her lace wrapper fell back, and showed their whiteness; her red-brown hair was drawn into a great knot at the back of her grand head, and it struck Lesley afresh what a glorious woman she was, and how idolized by almost any other man than Ronny she might have been.

And, only an hour ago, Lesley could have said to her, "Take Ronny." She could hear her own voice, with the ring of contempt in it; and *now* it was all explained. All at once, Lesley forgave her. Cynthia had been no such fool, after all; she had set her love high; she had loved worthily, and with all the strength of a fiercely pure, passionate heart.

In these short three weeks, bit by bit, the girl's character had revealed itself to Lesley, without a coarse or a mean trait in it; her only fault that she had loved unsought, and that she could not hide it—being, for all her worldly training, as sincere at heart as Lesley herself—any more than she could make flesh and blood of the men who admired her, who were but as shadows that crossed and

recrossed her path.

Something in Lesley's face, as she stood apart, frightened Cynthia out of her own reckless passion and pain, and, drawing near, she said—

"Oh! my God! Say that you don't love him, Lesley!"

Lesley looked up, with strained eyes; they would never be quite *young* eyes, such as she had brought to town, again.

"We were always quarrelling at first, you know," she said, "and I was always—praising—you; but we have grown quite chummy—lately."

"But you don't love him!" cried Cynthia, fighting, like a tigress for her whelps, for this man's love. "You will go away, you will forget all about him! Even if you have a fancy for him, it won't hurt you much to put it aside. You haven't loved him—child, girl, and woman—as *I* have done! Don't you think I know what men are? Either fools or knaves, ice or lava; to freeze a woman's heart with neglect, or warm it at the fires of their own passions, leaving her to their ashes afterwards! And there is only one Ronny, with deep, deep warmth under his coldness; and a woman had better be his dog than a lesser man's queen!"

And Lesley knew it was true. Oh! yes, it

was true. And in her ears was ding-donging the refrain of her own gospel, "Always help a fellow-woman if you can;" and now the time had come when she must act up to that gospel, or be a renegade to her own faith.

Help, yes; but beggar one's self? To strip off your purple robe of love, and wrap a beggar in it, hoping she may catch the king's eye; but what if you have stripped yourself naked in vain, and the king has already chosen?

"You do not love him," persisted Cynthia. "I have watched you. Even when he came up to the coach yesterday, you did not see—I knew that, by the way you spoke to him when we were coming back; by your face, as you walked with him in the park today. It will cost you nothing—*nothing*—to send him away. It is only strange to you when a man does *not* love you. You were made to be loved, not to love; and I must love or die!" She kneeled down and put her head in Lesley's lap, as the girl sat, cold and erect. "And there will be but one man in the world for me, and that is Ronny!"

For a moment Lesley hesitated, then laid her hand on the heavy, rich hair. She could never despise Cynthia again, for he was worth it all! Lesley's eyes dimmed as her gaze went leaping down the future, and she

saw—what did she see? Nothing that her indomitable spirit and high courage could not compass. She stood at the parting of the ways. There was time—just barely time, to draw back—wounded, perhaps, but not to the death—and let the other woman walk the path alone upon which the man's masterful steps echoed.

"Cynthia," she said, a little wildly, "I've got a great longing for Dad and home. I think I'll go tomorrow, and, if I don't see you again to wish you good-bye, you'll remember that I —wish you—your heart's desire!"

And, before Cynthia could rise to her feet, she was gone.

CHAPTER XVI.

"Gone away! Gone away!" The musical cry, so dear to fox-hunters, rang mockingly in Lesley's ears, but with no answering rush forward, no cheery following, as at five o'clock in the morning she stood in the middle of the room that had been prepared for her as an unwelcome guest, and whence she was now secretly departing, without that good character which she had so earnestly promised to Lady Appuldurcombe, and, secondarily, to Ronny.

"Gone away! Slipped off!" She covered her face, and thought of those words of Ronny's that had so angered her when she rode with Yelverton, perhaps because they were true—for Lesley had a perfect genius for running away, and had been sent to school three times, only to bob up serenely at Malincourt, having begged or stolen the money to pay her fare home, or, as on one occasion, walked the distance, and now she was running away again because, though she could give Ronny up, she could not trust herself to see him

again, and the worse he thought of her, the better it would be for—Cynthia.

She had told her maid that she was tired, and on no account to be called until half-past nine—and the train left at six-fifty—plenty of time to dress herself, and say good-bye to Miss Coquette, and she would be far on her journey before the cuckoo in the nest would be missed, and Ronny and his mother sitting down to breakfast.

She would have liked to say good-bye to Yelverton, and some of the men who had been really good to her in these brief three weeks—some of them had asked her to marry them; but the refusals of some women are more *piquante* than the "accepted with thanks" of others—and also to beg Lady Appuldurcombe's forgiveness for all the trouble she had given her; but this was impossible, though a little note on the table explained baldly enough that Lesley was homesick, and had "gone home."

When she had put on a cool, neat travelling-gown and hat, she enclosed a five-pound note, and addressed it to Charville, fastened gold in a good many envelopes with the servants' names outside, then taking up the little bag, which somehow she always associated now with Ronny, softly opened the

door, and listened intently, fearing lest some housemaid might thus early be stirring, and surprise her.

But Lady Appuldurcombe's household slept late, and the girl met no one, as, pausing one moment outside Ronny's door while her lips moved in a little loving, pitiful farewell and blessing in one to him, she stole softly down the stairway, and knowing the ways of the front door, soon unlatched it, and passed out.

It was on just such a morning that she and Ronny had made their expedition to Covent Garden together, and she stopped to look up at the drawn blinds of the house, wondering if she would ever see it, or Ronny, again.

And then for a moment her heart failed her, and, looking across the tree-tops in the direction of Grosvenor Place, her youth cried out passionately and insistently against the sacrifice she was making; and in that moment, when her heart cleaved to the house that hid Ronny from her eyes, and she could barely force her leaden steps away, she knew that she left behind in his keeping that which no other man had ever won, and how a poorer, yet an infinitely richer Lesley was she who now departed, than the girl, proud, undisciplined, and ashamed, who had so unwilling-

ly crossed his mother's threshold as guest such a little while ago.

A sleepy stable-boy unfastened the stable-door, and Miss Coquette, broad awake, and fresh as paint, looked over her shoulder, as Lesley came in, and whinnied with delight at sight of her. For once, the girl had no sugar in her hand; but Miss Coquette did not seem to mind, but rather to understand, as Lesley took off her hat, and, leaning her head against that satin neck, let the tears stream like rain down her face. It was because Coquette understood, that those tears came, and when she nuzzled her head delicately into Lesley's shoulder, it was as real a bit of comfort as if she had spoken a loving word, making, however, the parting all the harder, as, with a last kiss on her darling's forehead, Lesley at last tore herself away.

As she walked over the cobble-stones towards Bond Street, she said to herself that now she had got the worst over, and was glad to hear a clock strike six, so that she had not so very much time to spare after all.

When she had found a hansom, which was not so easy a matter, she began to think of what she would say to her father, what explanation she could give for this sudden appearance, maidless and luggageless, at Mal-

incourt.

Their correspondence lately had been sparse and cool, as both were angry with each other; but Lesley was too well aware of her father's real love for her, to have much fear of her reception. She smiled a little as she thought of what he would be doing when she arrived, and of how, if his back were to the door, she would steal up, and kiss the top of his head—but suddenly a disagreeable thought crossed her mind—what if Bob were there—Bob, who might read her secret in her face, and even dare to upbraid her with it?

"Poor Bob! Poor Dad! And poorer Lesley!" she said to herself bitterly, as the cab stopped before the grimiest, and most uncomfortable railway station, surely, in the whole world, and where, after all, she had some time to wait, which she partly beguiled by drinking a glass of milk, and eating a bun, though at last she found herself in the train, and thankful to be there, for what if her flight had been discovered, and search instituted for her?

"Slipped off!" She repeated the words as alone in her compartment the train moved slowly out of the station, and with nothing to read, and only her sad thoughts for company, Lesley set out for the home whence she had been sent discredited, only to return to it in

the *role* of an ungrateful runaway.

Presently she smiled as at a ludicrous memory—one, too, that she had kept to herself, not knowing how Lady Appuldurcombe, much less Ronny, would like the recital of a story that richly appealed to her own sense of humour—a humour that sometimes gave her grave doubts as to the delicacy of her own mind—though she had promised herself the treat of telling Lady Cranstoun when she got back.

It was only that on the journey up to town, a brute had got into her carriage, who tried to express his admiration by treading on her toes, but other people were present, and she would not make a scene; only, when he got out at Salisbury, she prepared a little surprise against his return. She tucked her feet up under her, put a light rug over her knees, buried herself in her book, and, when he returned, sat tight, looking as guileless as a cherub. Recommencing his manœuvres, amazement gave way to stupefaction as he explored the neighbourhood, unable to discover how the trick was done, and altogether nonplussed by the seraphic composure of her features as she looked out of the window, or consulted her book, till, finally, turning a last glance of uneasy horror upon her, her

tormentor bolted to a smoking-carriage, and left her in possession of the field.

How she had laughed; and now it seemed to Lesley that she would never be able to laugh again.

CHAPTER XVII.

"Mother," said Ronny at breakfast, which was at half-past nine, "I shall have to run out of town for a couple of days, so I can't take you and Lesley to the opera tonight, as I promised."

The words were simple enough, but their tone made the mother's instinct leap up, and she looked earnestly at her boy, feeling sure something was wrong, and caught him looking at her with a glance of such solicitous tenderness that her heart died within her.

"What is it, Ronny?" she said faintly. "You're ordered off on active service *again?*"

"Nothing of the kind, mother," he said cheerily; and went round and kissed her more fondly than he supposed, whereby he strengthened her suspicions, though she resolved to hide them, feeling convinced that somehow Lesley was at the bottom of the trouble.

"Where is Lesley?" he said, as he sat down, and helped himself to kidney-omelette. "This is the first time I ever knew her late; she is

usually down before either of us."

"Planning some fresh mischief, no doubt," said Lady Appuldurcombe, drily. "I don't feel at all comfortable about the way people look at her, Ronny. As if—as if——"

"Well, they won't much longer," said Ronny, rashly; and before his mother could unriddle this dark saying, Charville entered, bearing a letter on a salver, his usually unruffled countenance less majestic than usual as he withdrew.

"From Lesley," said Lady Appuldurcombe carelessly, but noticing that Ronny got up from his chair, and stood watching her face keenly as she read—and, indeed, the changes on it were astonishing, not to say alarming, as she proceeded.

"What is it, mother?" he broke out suddenly and passionately. "Is she ill—have you been pitching into her again?"

"She has run away!" said Lady Appuldurcombe with a gasp. "She is homesick, she says. How wicked! how outrageous! how altogether bad form!"

Ronny took the letter from his mother's limp hand; but almost before his eye had devoured it, he knew that Lesley had left him no message—that in these few brief lines of farewell, he was not even mentioned; and he

remembered grimly how there had been no answering look in her eyes yesterday when he betrayed himself. Yet she knew, she *must* know, how it was with him, and she had just run away from him.

He had fallen in with the other silly sheep behind her—yes! he was a sheep—and she was probably laughing at him now. What did one man's love, more or less, matter to Lesley? They had begun by quarrelling, and she was continually outraging his prejudices; but lately—he could scarcely date from when, but he thought it was that morning walk when she had shown him a glimpse of her real self—they had grown friendly together, and some of her intensely lovable "ways" had wound themselves about his heart, as they had done about so many others, he thought angrily.

"So ungrateful!" said Lady Appuldurcombe irritably; then, as one struck by a sudden thought, "You don't think there is any *man* in it, do you, Ronny?"

"Mother!" he said sternly—and she had never seen her son look so put out before—"how can you even think such a thing of Lesley? She has been in this house nearly three weeks, and when did you ever know her do a mean or underhand thing? What-

ever reason she has for going in this way, it is one that she considers right. Can't you see, even in those few hurried lines, that she went because she must, not because she wished to?"

And yet Cynthia never crossed his mind as he stood looking down on the irregularly-formed but charming handwriting that somehow brought Lesley—delightful, elusive, true-hearted—before him. For she was true-hearted where she loved, or might love—and was it her fault or his that she did not love *him?* There was not a drop of coward's blood in her veins, and he knew she had not run away because she feared to face his mother when it became known he had gone to fight a duel on account of her—Lesley. And then he drew a deep breath, and thought it was well the girl would be spared that awful scene with his mother that must have been enacted if—well, if he did not come back from that little journey to France which he was taking that very night.

Lesley did not know, could not possibly have heard of that *fracas* in the Park; and the two women had dined and spent the evening quietly at home for once, while he had been with Yelverton, making certain necessary preparations, and he had purposely not seen Lesley again since the afternoon.

He knew that he was doing a ridiculous thing in going out with Dashwood, still it was the only thing to be done, the only way to stop slandering tongues, and he was doing it. And supposing he came back safe, had it never occurred to Lesley, that if maids can run away, men sometimes run after them?

He heard his mother cross-questioning Lesley's French maid, as he stood looking out of the window, listened to the replies, and was quite sure Nadege knew no more about her young mistress's flight than they did; but when the young woman retired to pack up, and follow Lesley with all her belongings, he turned, and, going behind his mother, put his arms round her neck, and bent his head down to hers.

"Mother," he said, while she closed her eyes for pure happiness to be held by her boy thus, "never be hard on Lesley—promise me that—whatever happens, don't be hard upon her. If I am here, it would hurt me; if I am not, I think I should know it."

He laughed, but the laugh could not hide the earnestness of his tone; and, with a vague foreboding, his mother drew his face close to hers, and kissed his bronzed cheek passionately again and again.

"And if you were not here, Ronny," she

said, with trembling lips, "I should not be here very long either." But to her own heart she said, with stifled anguish, "I must make way, like the other poor mothers, for the other woman, who has come at last, Ronny, my king."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Malincourt sat, velvet-slippered, in the midst of a deer-park, through which a glorious stream ran, and the park itself melted almost imperceptibly into those well-stocked coverts almost as dear to their owner's heart as his stables and kennels, though dearer than all these things was his daughter Lesley, just then making her way, all unknown to him, under the trees towards the house.

She had a curious sense of outlawry, as if she might be discovered and driven away, as, bareheaded, she looked up to the green overarches that were different surely to when, but four short weeks ago, she had looked up at them in company with Bob.

Suddenly she stopped. It was precisely here that she had told Bob she meant to love him as a—a brother, and he had not seen it, and her father had not seen it, and so she had been packed off to town, where she had herself been burnt with the fire that hitherto she had so recklessly scattered broadcast among

others, and now it was her turn to suffer like the rest.

Very soon she would have to meet Bob; perhaps he was up at the house at that minute; and a glimpse of the long facade of Malincourt, that had begun by being stately, but by the aid of creepers, and age, and ivy, was now merely comfortable, made her feel inclined to ascertain first who was within, before bursting on her father's vision in the well-worn character of a young runaway.

But no; she would face out whatever had to be faced; and so it was, that Lord Malincourt, sitting alone in the library waiting for the luncheon-gong to sound, heard a light step behind him, felt two little hands pressed over his eyes, and with a sigh of satisfaction said

"Ah, Lassie, is that you?"

She *felt* the smile of welcome spreading all over his face, then went round, and when she saw the beaming, tender welcome that awaited her, felt as she kissed him, that her own dear old Dad was worth all the lovers in the world.

"I've been expecting you for—let me see—exactly nineteen days," he said, as she perched herself on his knee. "No luggage, of course?" he added, with a twinkle in the blue eyes set so cheerily in his ruddy, weather-

beaten face.

"No luggage," said Lesley, making him a polite little bow, and pinching his chin; "everything done in the good old style—position untenable, prompt evacuation—here we are! Nadege is coming on with the frocks presently; they've been awfully useful—those frocks."

Lord Malincourt chuckled, and pinched her cheek, a good deal less blooming than it had been something more than three weeks ago.

"I knew you'd never stand it," he said—"all cackle and spite and wickedness; and my Lady Appuldurcombe, with no idea of the ways of wild young fillies like you; but I don't see much improvement," he added, with a humorous glance at Lesley, who certainly looked no repentant sinner as she sat laughing, and looking at her father.

"Dad," she said suddenly, "you never served me but one mean trick in your life, and —and—I'll forgive you for that!" she added with a fine generous air, "though I never thought I could."

"Thank you, Lassie," he said, and looked at her so keenly that her colour rose. "You haven't replaced Bob, have you?"

"No one has a *real* place in my estimation but you, Dad. Bob's was—was only a slippery

one. How is that young man? Does he eat, drink, and sleep as soundly as ever?"

"I don't know his sleeping capacities," said Lord Malincourt, dryly, "but he doesn't live on gruel—at least when he is here. And you won't have found his equal in that Sodom and Gomorrah, I'm thinking. And pray what made the position untenable?"

Lesley hung her head.

"The luncheon-gong has sounded twice," she said, "and I'm *so* hungry! I started before seven!"

"Now Lesley," said Lord Malincourt, shaking his head; but at that moment a knock came at the door, and Lesley hopped off her father's knee to meet the white-haired man who entered, and dancing up, shook him heartily by the hand.

"Hutt," she said, "I'm so glad to see you! Lady Appuldurcombe's butler always made me feel he was a bishop doing curate's work!" And then she took her father's arm and marched him in to luncheon.

And it was quite in the nature of things, and in accordance with the gospel of unsuccessful lovers, that just as hungry Lesley was taking her first mouthful of roast chicken, Bob, all health, and tweed, and stalwart legs, clad in heather mixture, should stalk into the

room and utter a coarsely masculine shout of joy at sight of her.

"Bob," she said piteously, "do please let me finish this wing, and then I'll talk to you! Dad, some more gravy, please; and Hutt—the bread sauce!"

CHAPTER XIX.

Lady Cranstoun lay on a couch drawn close to a window commanding the avenue of beeches, under whose colonnade she had been in the habit of looking for the approach of some one she loved. Well, three weeks would be gone today; another week—and she smiled in anticipation of the bright presence, lovable personality of the girl whom she had come to love beyond any living thing on earth. But what was this advancing under the trees?—something white, moving as only Lesley knew how to move, and coming nearer every moment, resolved itself at last into Lesley's very own tall self.

Lady Cranstoun could have leaped to meet her, but sank back upon her pillows instead, hating her prison-house, loathing the litter of lovely, useless things whereby womankind bind themselves to the house beautiful, because often it takes the place of health, of love, of that forward movement in life's glorious battle, which is denied to most women, who, while watering and cultivating

their own little corner-plot, behold man walking in the middle path, with the whole wide garden in which to take his lordly pleasure, and from which to cull his nosegay. I think houses were originally made, not to live, but to rest in, for to neglect the whole panorama of Nature to gaze upon beautiful pots and pans, the work of men's hands, is not what human muscles, and flesh and blood, were originally meant for, and were I a man, I would be a wanderer all my days, and never sleep two nights running in the same bed.

It is those who spend the major part of their existence in the open air who get the most out of life, and the man who has his health, and with his hurdy-gurdy tramps the streets in foul weather or fine, is a million times more to be envied than the rich man who, surrounded by the boundless artificial beauty that wealth gives, lacks the health that living in the free air under heaven, alone bestows.

Lesley came in swiftly, and kneeling down beside her friend, put her arms gently about the frail figure, and kissed her warmly. Somehow with Cynthia she always felt so old, with Lady Cranstoun so young.

"Come back like a bad penny!" she said. "But, oh! it's nice to find every one so glad

to see that much-discredited coin! How have you been, dear? You never said a word about yourself when you wrote!"

"And *you* wrote so often," said Lady Cranstoun, laughing, "quite a diary in fact! But the papers supplemented your bald epistles very considerably!"

Lesley laughed.

"I'm like Dad," she said, "a hopelessly bad correspondent. He did not even know I was coming home today!"

Lady Cranstoun looked with sudden scrutiny at the girl, who was just then sitting on her heels with all the air of a naughty child determined not to own up to the jam with which its lips are palpably sticky.

"Lesley," she said, shaking her head, "you have been up to your tricks again; but that is of course. Has—has any one turned the tables on you at last?"

Lesley got up, and fetched a chair. When she had sat down in it, she took her friend's hand, noticing with a pang that it was thinner even than it had been three weeks ago, and kissed it tenderly.

"Go on," she said resignedly. "Ask me what you please, and I'll answer what—I'm able. Do you know, it would be quite refreshing to be some other impeccable person for a

time? I'm tired of being put in the corner, and for such a very, very little, too!"

"Well, then; how did the frocks turn out?"

"Unlike me, they were beyond reproach. I'm indebted to them—through you—for all the fun and the few scraps of—of affection that fell to my lot in town."

"Only scraps?" said Lady Cranstoun, tentatively.

"Oh, you know! A man gives a segment of his vanity, a corner of his love of annexation, a big slice of his fancy, and thinks it's his heart. I haven't done any real damage, really; even Yelverton isn't so hard hit but he'll recover."

"Roger Yelverton? If he has taken the fever, he'll have it badly. I know the man. But it is not Yelverton, Lesley; and yet there is some one——"

"Does my face tell such tales?" said poor Lesley, putting up her hand, as if to hide it. "Then I hope Bob has read it aright, and that now he will have the grace to let me alone. Why *will* unsuccessful lovers come to chivy you when you're just off a long journey, and haven't eaten anything since half-past six o'clock in the morning? And that is what Bob did at lunch time, but I've managed to sneak off; they think I'm resting in my own room at

the present moment!"

"Was your hurry to leave town so pressing as all that?" said Lady Cranstoun, raising the beautiful brows that went so well with the delicate auqiline of her face.

"I did not even wish my aunt good-bye," said Lesley, with a guilty air, "or Ronny." She brought the name out boldly; she would *have* to get used to mentioning her cousin in everyday conversation now.

"And who is Ronny? You never mentioned him in your—diaries."

"Ronny Kilmurry? He is Lady Appuldurcombe's son, and my half-cousin."

"Ronny Kilmurry is your cousin!" exclaimed Lady Cranstoun, incredulously. "The hero of whom every one is talking—the most splendid fellow—I actually forgot he was Lady Appuldurcombe's son, and you never reminded me," she added reproachfully, for Lady Cranstoun read the newspapers—of course, all disappointed women do—and more than ever when the page of life is unreadable, or not to their liking.

"I did not know it myself till I got to town. Dad never even mentioned him, and you know we never read the newspapers. I don't think auntie ever quite forgave me for knowing nothing about him; but *he* was very glad. He

is the most simple, modest——"

Lady Cranstoun stretched out her arms, and drew the girl's face down to her own.

"Dear," she said, "I'm so glad. The right man has come at last, and it is Ronny Kilmurry."

"He has come—and gone," said Lesley in a whisper; "he has never said one word of love to me, and—and there is another woman. She loved him first, and——"

"He does not love her now," said Lady Cranstoun, putting Lesley away that she might look in her face, and, reading it closely, adding, "perhaps never did. Sometimes a man has no choice in such matters—even a Ronny."

Lesley did not reply. Her forehead rested against the elder woman's cheek, and for the first time since Ronny's soul had surrendered itself to hers in Lady Appuldurcombe's dining-room, she let herself go, and the deep waters of anguish rolled over her in full tide.

She neither moaned nor sobbed, and no tears came, even with that human touch of sympathy warm about her that unlocks most women's hearts; and when she looked up at last, though her forehead was wet, the spirit that looked out of her blue eyes was so indomitable that Lady Cranstoun knew,

though the girl herself were broken in pieces like a potter's vessel, that spirit would be broken, never.

"I can't talk about it—about her," the girl said steadily, "for she is my friend. He is more than life to her, and I—shall—get—over it."

Lady Cranstoun turned her head away, and her eyes were dim.

"Oh! the loyalty of it—the young, lavish, true-hearted, beautiful loyalty," she thought, "that could make one woman thus give up to another the man she loved! Only youth could be capable of such a self-sacrifice, only such a girl as Lesley could make it."

"And she accepted it?" said Lady Cranstoun, slowly. "Knowing that he loved you, she was willing to make him wretched, you wretched, to spoil both your lives, so long as she filched a pitiful rag of happiness to cover herself withal! I despise the woman from my soul; and oh! Lesley, Lesley, my dear"—and there was a ring of triumph in her voice—"you have reckoned without the man! You two women have planned it all out very nicely, but you have reckoned without a Ronny Kilmurry! And from all I have heard of Mr. Ronny, I should say he is a man never to be turned aside from his purpose; never to be

baulked of his heart's desire; and if Malincourt does not see him very shortly, I am very much mistaken."

"It would not matter," said Lesley, who had risen, and was now tidying her dark ruffled locks. "You—you don't know how I can make men *hate* me when I really try," then began hurriedly to talk of other things. But at last the moment came when the two looked at each other, and Lady Cranstoun asked the question that she desired.

"And did I fit you well or ill for your encounter with the world, Lesley?" she said.

For a while Lesley was silent, then she answered.

"In many respects, well; but you were too hard on men; they are not all Kinskis and Graham Dashwoods."

"Lesley," cried Lady Cranstoun, "your beauty is the touchstone that brings out every atom of good in every decent man you meet; when that beauty has faded, the man's goodness will fade too, and you will be bitterly disappointed. God made the world *for girls.*"

Lesley shook her head.

"A really good man is better than the best woman," she said. "I have known at least two, Dad and Ronny—perhaps three, reckoning Bob. I am not so sure about Roger Yel-

verton."

Lady Cranstoun was silent for a while, then she said with an effort—

"And what did that high and mighty aunt of yours say to your friendship with me?"

Lesley was silent, and the colour came into her face.

"And so you blame me?" said Lady Cranstoun, very quietly. "You have gone out into the world and heard what it calls women like me. And in your heart, Lesley, you have tried, and found me wanting."

"No," said Lesley, very pale, and speaking with difficulty, "it is only that I love you so much, I wish you had remained the victim of man's cruelty, not tried to revenge it—on yourself. The man begins the game, the woman carries it on, and if the woman refused, the men would not have the excuse they have now, in our frailty, for it is in *our* hands that the regeneration of man lies; they could not be what they are but for—us."

Lady Cranstoun lay quite still, her colourless face turned away.

"So this is what the world has taught you," she said. "No more than this—that woman is for evermore to be the scapegoat of man. And yet the air is full of inarticulate cries—of the struggles of women to free themselves

from centuries of bondage, and they must, they *will* be heard. I find their books, their cries, though pitched in an unmodulated key, deeply interesting," added Lady Cranstoun, defiantly, "and I would not silence any one of them, if I could."

"And I find them all wrong," said Lesley, firmly, though with flushed cheeks, "because they are one and all based on the plan of retaliation. And all a woman has got to do is, *not* to retaliate. She must be proud and strong enough to keep her own life intact, and not give man the triumph of spoiling it, her one weapon against his cruelest assaults is—example. We belong to ourselves first—to man after. It is what one knows about one's self that matters, the world's verdict does but echo it, one takes away the last chances of influencing a man by reducing one's self to his level, and to call it revenge, is worse than childish. It is all in our own hands. As the mother trains her son, so will he be, the scourge or joy of some other woman, and if each one of us did her duty in her own little corner, there would be fewer bad men in the world, and a good many happier women."

"I see that you are not Lady Appuldurcombe's niece for nothing," said Lady Cranstoun, with a restless effort to turn her half

paralyzed body, that pierced Lesley to the heart, and made her feel a brute.

"You know that is not true," she said, taking the wasted hand lovingly in both hers, "that I love you better than any one in the world, save Dad, and"—she coloured brilliantly—"one other; but I have kept my eyes and ears open in town, and I see very plainly that there are faults on both sides; they do not lie entirely with the men, and the remedy lies with us women—not them."

Lady Cranstoun drew her hand gently away. It is the curse of women that the whole world is colored rose or grey, according to her individual experience, and to lie here, chained like a log—trouble that one can walk away from, is always bearable—and then she glanced at Lesley, and something in the little face made her realize how one must be quite young to suffer with all one's heart and soul as she was doing then.

"Don't be angry with me," said the girl, when she was going away, "I've got lots to go through, and I can feel now—for Bob."

CHAPTER XX.

The disappearance of The Lovely Malincourt from the Row on Monday morning was the subject of much comment, and when she was neither to be seen walking, or driving, that afternoon, the tongue of scandal gave full cry, and things that had been merely whispered about her up to now, were openly discussed by those enemies who bark at the chariot-wheels of all who ride to success.

She had come, she had gone, like a delicious breath of spring fragrance athwart a dusty, broiling day, and her youth would no longer shame the other women, or her brightness make them appear dull and stupid when beside her, and now that she had vanished, well —*les absens ont toujours tort,* and so had she.

Neither Ronny nor Yelverton, her two faithful henchmen, were anywhere about to hear, and long before evening it was known to all their set, save Lady Appuldurcombe and Cynthia, that Kilmurry and Dashwood had quarrelled about The Malincourt, and that at some secret time and place abroad,

the insult to her would be wiped out in one or the other's blood—possibly both.

Cynthia did not know it, for the simple reason that her mother was very ill, with one of those heart attacks to which she was subject, and that by their very frequency failed to seriously alarm those about her.

The girl had ample time to think over her interview with Lesley, as she sat in the darkened room, and heard the roll of life go past—time in which to realize what a shamelessly selfish part she had played yesterday, and what a noble one Lesley, for now that through deep humiliation she had passed to her heart's desire, it tasted bitter between her lips, and some inward voice told her it was all in vain. Had she not loved Ronny because in him was no shadow of turning, because above a mob of insincere and shifting manhood, he had towered head and shoulders, at once steadfast and true? And why should he turn now, when the tide of his love had set strong and swift towards Lesley?

"*Sweet as your smile shone on me ever,*" she whispered blow her breath. "O God, grant that it may shine on *me*—not her!" Yet, as she thought of his face at Sandown as he approached Lesley, she knew that no such sunshine had ever come into it at sight of any

other woman, and he was not one to be put off lightly, even if Lesley did run away from him. And perhaps she had not gone; what if, after all, she *did* love him, and they had met, and the man had swept aside like cobwebs the compact made between two foolish women? The thought became unendurable. Cynthia stole from the room, and calling her maid, sent her across to Park Lane with some trifling message to Miss Malincourt that required a verbal answer, then sat down, and feverishly awaited the result.

She had not long to wait. "Miss Malincourt had left for Somersetshire that morning." The maid did not add that Charville's extreme reticence had convinced her that something was amiss at Park Lane, or add that Nadege in crossing the hall at a distance had sent her a telepathic message that announced startling events.

Cynthia drew a deep breath of relief as she shut the door, and went back to her mother's side.

So Lesley had kept her word, and if Ronny had tried to hinder her, he had not succeeded. And now, what next—and next? Cynthia asked herself a little drearily.

The season would soon be over, they would all go different ways; it was not even certain

that they would meet in Scotland; and in the autumn Ronny would rejoin his regiment, and though often in town on leave, even if she were here, the opportunities of seeing him would be limited, unless he chose to make them for himself.

Hopelessly the girl looked out across the scarlet and blue flower-boxes to the tree-tops beyond, and the intense misery of being a woman, to be left, or taken, at that moment pressed her hard.

Oh, to be the meanest, the most miserable thing alive, so long as it be a man, she thought, for he will always find some woman to love, to sacrifice herself for him; but a woman's lot is a cruel one, without even the right of selection; she may be plucked or left to wither—it all depends on the eye of the passer-by; but a man has love—love, all the way along from birth to bier, so that no wonder at last it tempts him not.

"Cynthia," said her mother's weak voice from the bed, "don't be frightened, dear; but I think I am more ill than usual this time. Will you send for the doctor, and the boys?"

"Oh, mother!" cried Cynthia, roused in shame from her own selfish dreams, "you have been more ill than this often;" but as she kissed the chilly face, a foreboding that

this was the last of those heart-attacks that had been so much more prolonged of late, swept over the girl's heart, and left it more desolate than before.

"The boys," insisted the mother, when a servant had driven off post-haste for the doctor, and in a very few moments messages to them also were dispatched, and Lady de Salis, white as the pillows, and surrounded by her women, was looking at the clock, praying that her boys might be in time yet.

For it is to her "boys" that the mother's heart goes out passionately, both in living and dying; and Cynthia felt this keenly, as, with arms about her, she listened for the doctor's step, which came at last, more quickly than could have been expected.

"Can you do nothing?" she whispered, when, his brief examination over, he stood looking gravely down on her mother.

He shook his head.

"I have expected this for years," he said in the same tone; "she will not suffer at all. Is there any one she particularly wishes to see? For time is short."

"My boys," said Lady de Salis, distinctly.

"They are coming, mother! Oh, mother, they are coming!" cried Cynthia, wildly.

"And Jane Appuldurcombe," said Lady de

Salis, more faintly, "send for her." She lay taking no notice after that, and seemed lapsing into unconsciousness; but when Lady Appuldurcombe came in, she opened her eyes, and said, "Jane—dear old friend—take care of Cynthia. Ronny will—not—mind——" Her eyes closed, and by a great effort she said, *"Lesley."*

Lady Appuldurcombe stooped down, and kissed the waxlike face that she had known from childhood, and solemnly she said—

"I promise, Mary. I will take care of Cynthia as if she were my own."

Lady de Salis smiled. Suddenly a bright light broke over her face, and for the last time her eyes opened wide, and fixed themselves on the door. *"The boys!"* she said. And as two of them entered—the third was too late—she stretched out her arms towards them, and as they came near to her, kissed their faces, and drew their heads lovingly down to her breast.

Then silence—and in that warm haven where as little children their heads had cuddled, so they rested now, the bitter tears of strong men falling on her neck. She was not old, or fat, or ridiculous to them; she was just—mother.

CHAPTER XXI.

Ronny had left before Lady Appuldurcombe was summoned to Grosvenor Place, consequently knew nothing of what went forward there, and, with Yelverton, ran down to Dover, and duly crossed to France that night.

Neither of the men were in particularly good spirits, Ronny being anxious on his mother's account, and Yelverton on Lesley's —for he thought he understood that young woman better than Ronny did, and infinitely better than she did herself.

And in Yelverton's opinion, the whole thing was a blunder from beginning to end, and all the exigencies of the case would have been met by a sound horse-whipping in public of Dashwood, as it was now impossible to keep Miss Malincourt's name out of the affair.

The man who in the park had witnessed the encounter, and refused to be Dashwood's second, had talked; the other men, who had also declined to back up a man of Dashwood's character against a man of Kilmurry's, had talked, and no earthly good could come of

this encounter with a notoriously successful duellist, even if Ronny winged his man, which seemed unlikely.

Dashwood had found his second at last, a man of life not more notoriously evil than his own, but of lower social status, and Yelverton's spirit kicked at the whole business, although this had not hindered his carrying out all arrangements with great skill and secrecy, so that when they had dined, and were about to separate for the night, there was little more to do than to receive Ronny's final instructions, in case the worst happened.

"This is for my mother," said Ronny, giving Yelverton a letter, "and this"—he paused and coloured, for love-letters had not been in his line—"for Miss Malincourt."

Yelverton took both letters, and put them away in his breast-pocket.

"And Miss Coquette?" he said—"you wish her sent down to your cousin?"

Ronny started.

"Of course," he said, "what a brute I was to forget it. And if"—he paused—"perhaps in that case you'll take the mare down yourself, Yelverton, and tell *her*. My mother will be hard upon her—poor mother—poor little girl. She didn't want to come to town, and none of this is her fault, but because she was

true to herself, because she was not facile as the other women are, she made a deadly enemy of that reptile."

Yelverton nodded. He felt about as bad as a man can feel, and without the relief of expression; but now he blurted out—

"And if I had the remotest chance of winning such a girl as Miss Malincourt, I'd take jolly good care of my life—not throw it away as you are doing now."

"It's odd," said Ronny, "that though I've seen lots of fighting, I've never been out before; but I don't feel as if I were destined to die by that scoundrel's hand. Somehow, my luck has brought me through a good bit hitherto——"

"Pluck, you mean," said Yelverton, groaning; "but pluck and dash, and simpy never knowing when you are beaten, won't help you much here. The man is a dead shot, and you have had next to no pistol-practice; and remember that this is Dashwood's last chance. His final hold as a bully on society is lost, if you come successfully out of the encounter."

"And now to bed," said Ronny cheerily, and with as little personal concern as if he looked on at a drama that did not in the least concern him.

"And to think," said Yelverton when he

turned in, "that the man who almost single-handed kept a savage army at bay, who has come through such hair-breadth 'scapes, has perhaps come home to be potted by a blackguard like Dashwood!"

If, when Lesley woke very early that morning, she had been a clairvoyante, she would have seen in one of those exquisite green dells to be found in the Bois de Boulogne, two men facing each other, resolute-eyed, composed, lost to all save the desire on the one part to wing his man, on the other to take his adversary's life.

As Yelverton let the handkerchief fall, two shots rang out simultaneously, and Ronny stood unharmed, while Dashwood, with a wild-beast cry, and putting one hand to his face, fell to the ground, his jaw shattered, and partly blown away.

"Gentlemen," said Yelverton, hurrying forward, "honour is satisfied, and the affair is at an end."

But he was wrong, for the crowning infamy and degradation of Dashwood's life was yet to be committed, and in a way impossible to foresee by those around him. For, ruined in character and reputation, pursued by creditors, repudiated by his friends, he had come here fully determined to kill Ronny

by fair means or foul—Ronny whom he hated for his bravery, his clean life, the hundred and one trifles that go to make up the man of social standing and character, as the absence of them makes such pests to society as Graham Dashwood himself. And now that, as some instinct had warned him, Ronny remained untouched, while his own reckless beauty, the beauty which was his sole remaining possession, was irretrievably ruined, Dashwood whipped out the tiny revolver he had concealed on his person, and fired at Ronny, who was just then turning away, then a second report rang out, and Dashwood had paid all debts, and Ronny Kilmurry seemed on the point of paying all his—of love, or otherwise.

CHAPTER XXII.

Lord Malincourt, only too rejoiced to have his "Lassie" at home again, with no fresh catalogue of misdemeanours tacked on to her skirts, or bombardment of proposals for her, following through the post, rose, on the morning following her return, with real enjoyment, and as he shaved, reflected that Bob's chances had certainly been strengthened by that strategic move of packing Lesley off to town.

He had received a kind, a very kind letter from Jane Appuldurcombe, prompted, nay, almost dictated by Ronny before he set out for France (ostensibly to see after his horses) on the day of Lesley's flight, speaking very nicely of the girl, and giving the impression that she had more or less retrieved the character with which she had been labelled when sent to town, and that her aunt and cousin were really sorry to lose her—as one of them was.

Whereupon, his heart light within him, and looking the very picture of an English

country gentleman, he descended to breakfast, and as he watched Lesley pouring out his coffee, told himself that rest, and fresh air, and Bob, would soon restore her lost bloom, and that no matter what her future vagaries might be, he would never send his Lassie so far away from him again.

The oak furniture, the panelled walls, took a new and almost jocund air now the young flitting presence was here again, and already the place was crammed with roses, a duty that in Lesley's absence had been neglected by "Mr. Hutt."

"I've asked about a dozen men for the First," said Lord Malincourt, when he had put away a breakfast that would not have disgraced a ploughboy, "and if your cousin Kilmurry isn't already booked, perhaps he'll come too—and Jane," he added ruefully; "or do you think ten days or so of the country would kill her?"

"He is sure to have made his plans, Dad," said Lesley, her little face white as privet flowers above her pink cotton gown; "and I do think it would kill Aunt Jane—honestly!"

"What sort of a chap is he—head a bit turned—eh?" inquired her father as he lit a cigar, looking "the Squire" all over, in his shabby, comfortable coat and knickerbock-

ers of tweed.

"Who told you? He is too great a man to put any side on," flashed out Lesley, adding quickly: "Dad, we really ought to take some paper in besides *Bell's Life;* it would have saved me from some rather considerable blunders when I went up to town!"

"Well, you are not going again," said her father, contentedly; "and I'd rather give you all Smollett's and Fielding's books to read, than one daily paper."

"And I never did," said Lesley. "Oh, Dad, it's a shame and a national disgrace to see the things placarded in the streets, and to hear the newsboys shouting them out! Everything vile, disgraceful to human nature stares you in the face in letters a foot long, till at last you want to rush away, and hide yourself from the awful indictment brought against the whole race; you get a feeling that crime is catching, that if you are not a criminal now, you may be some day, and you long to be just a decent beast of the earth!"

"Awful!" said Lord Malincourt; "you see, I was not so far out when I told you what town was. And yet folks were very kind to you there, Lassie, I hear?" he added, with a twinkle in his eye.

"Who told you that?"

"Bob—he cut paragraphs out of all the weeklies about you;—called you 'The Lovely Malincourt,' you little jade, did they? He brought 'em over here to read to me, expecting every day to see an important announcement. But you have been a good girl, haven't you, Lassie." he added, looking at her keenly.

"I haven't broken a single heart that I know of," she said truthfully, "but it nearly broke *mine,* to see the lives of the poor cheek by jowl with the lives of the rich! Dad, you noticed my letters were very short,"

"Very—shorthand documents, I may say, or telegraphese."

"And that I never asked for any money beyond my allowance?"

"I noticed it."

"Well, that was my pride; I did it to punish you! Oh, you would have been *sorry* if you had seen me in shabby gloves, and wearing the same frock at least three times, but all I saved out of my clothes went for my poor people down East."

"That *was* punishing me, Lassie; but did you do any good?"

"Oh yes, Dad, it helped them to play—a little. It *can't* be right that they are to have all work and no play; let them work, *make* them work, but at the same time give rest and

refreshment in between. Did not Frank Buckland say that God meant all His families to be happy? And He did. He never meant creation to be a mill-round in which everything has its resting space, save man! And if, when we have given them a living wage and done all we can, they are still wicked—well, we must not be discouraged, one must make a beginning somewhere! Oh, how can they rise above such misery, such surroundings, and live decent lives? I should like to see one of us try it; see how quickly we deteriorate if things go wrong with us, how reckless we are, and then say if you can expect to find such enormous strength of will, such strenuous struggle towards right, in these poor wretches whose every energy is concentrated on keeping body and soul together—not one of us could lift ourselves out of such a slough as that!"

"It's hopeless, almost hopeless," said Lord Malincourt. "A tax on every child born might help a little, or emigration on a gigantic scale, with big cities built for them to go straight to; it's their gregarious instincts that make them almost impossible to deal with. But, child," he added, looking anxiously at her little white face, "you take these things too much to heart. This is not the sort

of talk one expects of a little girl fresh from the delirious delights of town."

"It is a cruel place, and you were quite right about it, Dad," she said. "I never want to see it again. If the masses were not so strong, and patient, and noble-hearted for all their faults, there would have been a revolution long ago! And as to the books I've been reading—the only comfort is that they reflect a phase—not one of them will be alive in five years' time!"

"You are like the boy let loose in the sweet-stuff shop, Lassie. I knew it would sicken you, but I felt pretty bad about it, I can tell you? I couldn't bear to think I'd discredited you—only you cut me to the quick about Bob! The others had themselves to blame; but he—well, it was a case of 'almost' there."

Lesley was leaning her cheek on her hand, and tracing patterns on the damask table-cloth with a fork.

"Dad," she said, "Bob is not a good companion for me. I want lots of discipline, and I don't get it from Bob. He laughs when I use Words, he encourages me in slang—morally and mentally he would let me go all to pieces if I married him!"

"That's something new, to quarrel with a lover because he can't see your faults," said

Lord Malincourt, pushing his chair back from the table a little irritably. "You're about good enough for Bob and me, and who else do you want to please?" he added, with a look of scrutiny that she declined to meet, as she, too, rose and, taking him by the lappets of his coat, kissed his wholesome cheek fondly, and for a moment rested her head against his shoulder.

"I am just going down to the Home Farm," he said, patting her cheek, and Lesley knew perfectly well that he was getting himself out of the way that Bob might have his chance—Bob the inevitable. If only it had been Ronny, she thought, as she came back, and walked up to a full-length portrait of her mother that hung above the fireplace, and somehow Cecilia looked different to what she had done when the girl had last gazed at her face. Love had been a sealed book to Lesley, then, and now, lo! at one negligent, masterful touch, the pages had opened wide, and all unwillingly she was forced to decipher the characters therein, yet was not the page as hard in the reading to Ronny, as to her? He was as difficult, as fastidious in his likings as she; he had disapproved of, had lectured her, and if she had not wanted to love Ronny, Ronny had most certainly wanted to love her, and there

was a touch of the ridiculous in yielding to another woman her claims upon a man who had never spoken a word of love to her in his life.

Long and intently she studied her mother's face, seeing many things that with this new light in her mind she had never seen before, and trying to realize how with all her waywardness and charm and *esprit,* her lovely mother had been content to give up that world in which she shone so brilliantly, to marry and settle down happily with a Bob, in the heart of the country. And she had died at thirty, not of the country, as Jane Appuldurcombe suggested, but of a fever, contracted in visiting a sick child of the village, where she was adored.

And was it not a beautiful, self-sufficing life after all—this peaceful country one, where rich and poor knew one another well; where conduct was everything and fashion less than nothing; where health came first, and in its natural train love, and wealth last of all, since without health to enjoy love, and love to enjoy wealth, is not all vanity?

Cecilia had made her bed, lain down on it, and been happy. Was it the last and best gift of the gods that she died young, and passionately regretted, instead of living to weep for

those others, who at every step fell out of the marching ranks, till at last she could weep no more, only long for the time when she would go to *find*, not leave, all that she had loved best on earth?

Questioning those happy eyes, Lesley asked if there had ever been a Ronny in Cecilia's life? And the blue eyes, so like Lesley's own, gave back the answer that if there had been, he had been effectually smudged out by the warm personality of a Bob; for Lord Malincourt's name, too, was Robert.

"You can't help me mother," said Lesley, desolately, as she turned away; and, indeed, no one can help us in our struggles with Fate or ourselves, for the most part we must climb unaided out of every pit into which we have blindly fallen, and the gleam of angels' wings smiting the walls of our prison-house, and stooping to us in succour, is so rare as to merit the designation of a miracle itself.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Bob Heatherly was of that order of man which knows what it wants, and is quite determined to get it; so having very early after breakfast drawn Malincourt, the park, the gardens, and every known covert, blank, he went further afield, and at last found Miss Lesley perched on the top of a high gate that had been a favourite vantage ground of hers from childhood upwards, since it gave a splendid outlook whence to view the approach of her pastors and masters, and, later on, those lovers whom it was her one aim in life to escape.

She coloured with anger at her own folly when he approached her—for had she not, in her brief engagement to him, given up the key of at least one of the childish secrets of her life? Yet she had not the least idea of running away from this man, who, until three weeks ago, had alone come within appreciable measuring distance of what she was pleased to term her heart.

"Good morning, Lesley," he said, lifting

the cap, that left his resolute, handsome face entirely uncovered to her intent gaze as he drew near; but she did not speak—she was rating, valuing him at his just value—so much he felt as she looked down upon him, and all at once he knew that she had hit the blot—but what was it? He did not know, but Lesley did. He was every whit as good as Ronny, in some respects superior, for he was infinitely better looking, had a sweeter nature,—but this is woman's law, and it was Lesley's, that the experience she cannot get for herself she must get at second-hand, and it is the man of action and experience who wins her, though the other man, had he the same chances, might have done even more brilliantly, and thrilled her with even a greater pride and joy in him.

Bob knew her face too well to miss its meaning now, but he was stout-hearted, as indeed he must have been, to enjoy the honour of being really engaged to Lesley for about a week, so he leaned his arms on the top of the gate, and waited for her to speak.

"It seems a hundred years since I sat here last," said Lesley, looking out from the cool, long patch of shade in which she sat to the sunlit panorama beyond and around that her favourite "gap" afforded so magnificent a

view of. And she had been enjoying it all so keenly when Bob came up—it was so good to get a real drink at Nature, untainted at its fount by jostling crowds of fellow humans!

"And I've no doubt you've done a thousand years' mischief in them," said Bob, dryly. "Perhaps you've put them all on their *parole*, as you did me—not to approach you for a month?"

"Oh, for Eternity!" said Lesley, growing flippant, as she always did when misunderstood. "If a curtsey were possible on the top of a gate, I'd drop you one for your belief in my powers."

"Oh, I know you, Lesley," cried Bob, "how you can make a fool of any man you like! It isn't your beauty, or your ways, it's that terrible sincerity about you that makes every man feel you couldn't love anybody who wasn't exactly right—and naturally everybody wants to be that man, and tries to be!"

Bob was saying just what Ronny had looked, and Lesley flinched as she glanced away from Bob's determined face, every whit as dominant in its masculinity as Ronny's own, and Lesley at heart was intensely feminine, as all women must be who greatly attract and influence men.

It occurred suddenly to her how funny it

was that Cynthia should have established a prior right on Ronny, just as Bob did on her, and the persons most concerned were to have no finger in the pie! Had Cecilia been selected by her Bob in the same masterful fashion, and, recognizing the usefulness of flight, yielded to her fate? She bowed her head in a way that in any one but Lesley might well have betokened submission, but Bob did not dare to take her in his arms; he stooped instead to her shoe-strings, taking both slender feet in one hand as he kissed them.

"Dear little feet!" he said; "how do you manage to walk on them? I wonder they don't snap like sealing-wax; and they are not strong enough to carry you far away from me, Lesley, though, if they did, I should soon catch you and bring you back, though, thank God, you couldn't even put in the month you went away for!"

"Oh! you lovers," she said helplessly, "how alike you all are! I wonder if we women are just as much like one another, and as uninteresting?"

"Well," said Bob with alacrity, "we brutes of men *are* uncommonly alike. It's because there's only one Lesley, that we all love you, and one of us being so very much like another, why not take *me?* You know you really

thought seriously about it once, or why did you—did you"—he looked up at her, laughing all over his handsome face—"condescend to sit on my knee?"

"I—I didn't," said Lesley, blushing scarlet. "I—I only slithered, and it was not more than twice, at the outside!"

"But it was more than twice that you let me—kiss you," said Bob, growing nasty under the keen disappointment that stung him.

"*Kissed* me!" cried Lesley, lifting her little scornful face miles away from him; "whoever heard, pray, of a woman kissed satisfactorily against her will, or what woman ever kissed any man satisfactorily unless her whole inclinations went jumping with her lips? For you may get the tip of her nose, or the top of her head, but that is *not kissing*," concluded Lesley, with a profound air of having devoted a life-time to the art.

"And pray," said Bob, stiffly, "have you had so much practice in town?"

Lesey looked down at him with something new and kind in her eyes; she had begun to suffer herself, and could feel for the sufferings of others. She remembered how Ronny had said one day—

"Lesley, you are very bent on doing good to the poor, but how do you suppose you are

improving men—by jilting them?"

"Bob," she said thoughtfully, "a man named Lombroso says, we women have not the capacity for suffering that you have; that we are less sensitive in every way. But that's not true; it is only that we bear pain better; that our lives are one long pain, more or less, and so we cease to cry out in it; and I always say, you know, that you men do not die in shoals of influenza, but of pure fright; it is as difficult to find one of *us* dead of it, as a dead donkey!"

"Yes, dear?" said Bob, interrogatively; "and this is *apropos* of——?"

"Nothing; only I hate Lombroso. He doesn't know anything at all about women. You must *be* one to appreciate the misery of it."

"So you have not enjoyed your visit to town!" cried Bob. "In spite of the sensation you made, and with everything possible to turn your head, you haven't enjoyed it? You couldn't even manage to put in your month at the tread-mill! And you've lost all your lovely bloom," he added, with a commiserating look at the little face that, pale or rosy, was the one face in the whole world to him.

"Oh, I've been learning," she said, looking far away over his head to the hills beyond.

"I've learned a lot about the world and its wicked ways during the past three weeks."

"Nothing to hurt you, I hope?" he said jealously. "Real women are rare nowadays. We can't afford to spare one of them, and you aren't womanly for a pose, Lesley—it's natural to you, and you can't help it."

"Bob," she cried impatiently, "you mustn't; you've got to talk sense to me, not honey! I might cultivate a good sound virtue or two, if you would help me to eradicate some of the weeds of my character."

"There are none," said Bob, stoutly; "or if you had any, one doesn't want an angel, but something human. There was a big, ugly fellow always dangling after you in town," he blurted out; "you were with him a lot; has *he* been telling you of your faults? Like his cheek!"

"Roger Yelverton? No. He is almost as demoralizing as you are! But he is a good sort, and a real friend."

"He wants to marry you, of course?"

"He never breathed the wish, and I hardly think he will now."

Bob beamed all over.

"And there's no one else?" he said. "I don't reckon the men you've refused, but Churchill said, if it wasn't Yelverton, it was no one."

"Just so. Blessed are those who know nothing, and diligently spread the same. Isn't it almost lunch time? You mustn't come in today, Bob, I'm busy. *Bob!*"

For he had lifted her from the top rung of the gate, and was now holding her like a doll at arm's length, a deadly intention gathering in his lover's eyes, and spreading all over his handsome, eager, brown face.

"And if you do, Bob," said Lesley, white as snow, "I'll kill you; more than that, I'll never speak to you again to my dying day."

The words were nothing. The flash in her blue eyes told a lot. He set her down, pale as she, for instinct told him that she was worlds further away from him than when she had slithered on his knee and permitted him those Tantaus sips of kisses of which she herself had just now denounced the mockery. Yet, swiftly as he turned away, the look on his face hurt her; verily, some of the suffering she had inflicted on others was coming home to roost, and for once she saw herself in the true odium of the jilt's character as she turned homewards, following in heart some little way Bob's listless footsteps to Heather Court, sent home in disgrace thus early on the day that he had been looking forward to so keeny for three miserable weeks.

Who was it? That it was somebody, Bob knew. And Churchill had been so sure that all the men were out of the running, save Yelverton.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Lady Appuldurcombe, driving home that Tuesday about noon from Grosvenor Place, thought with a sigh of relief and gladness that Ronny would be home tomorrow, her own Ronny, who could not have cared so much for Lesley after all, or he would have gone after her, instead of devoting himself to horses, but then he had a stern way of nipping any feeling of that sort in the bud, so determined was he that no woman's influence should come seriously into his life. But what would he say when he saw Cynthia installed in Park Lane? For as soon as the funeral was over, and all arrangements made, Lady Appuldurcombe had begged the girl to come to her for as long as she liked—which would probably be a very long while indeed.

And at that very moment, almost within earshot, the newsboys were shouting out in Piccadilly—

"Duel in 'Igh life—Barrow-knight killed, Major Kilmurry shot in the back." And men crowded to the club windows, and rushed out

bare-headed to buy papers, doubting the evidence of their ears. Ronny, Ronny Kilmurry, who had never run away in his life, shot in the *back?* And Dashwood. the bully and fire-eater—dead.

"What will his mother say?" inquired Onslow blankly, when he and Ralph Seton had read the brief paragraph together.

"Or The Lovely Malincourt?" said Seton, "since she is at the bottom of the whole imbroglio? I should never have thought it to look at her—she's just one of those dear little girls—for all she is so tall—that you feel wouldn't hurt a fly, yet if there is a broken-hearted woman in Town today, that woman is Lady Appuldurcombe—and all the gentle Malincourt's doing!"

"She is awfully cut up at her old friend, Lady de Salis' death," said Onslow. "Some one ought to go and tell her—or she may hear some of those beggars shouting it in the streets. I've a great mind——" he paused, for his courage failed him. It wants something more than mere pluck with which to face a mother who loved her son as Ronny's loved him, to tell her that out yonder her darling lay miserably dying. And then there was Cynthia—how would she take it? Between the two, Onslow did nothing, only prowled

restlessly up and down between the two stricken homes, and by eating no luncheon, in some vague way felt he was partly helping them to bear it.

Charville's dark, clean-shaved, handsome face was unwontedly pale when he opened the door to his mistress, and at luncheon sent both his scared-looking subordinates out of the room, and waited entirely on her himself.

He even exceeded his office by pressing champagne on his mistress, and seemed above all things anxious that she should make a good luncheon; but the face he turned to the sideboard was heavy with grief, and he looked like a man who has a hard task before him from which he dares not flinch.

Lady Appuldurcombe spoke to him from time to time, chiefly of Ronny, and of little things to be done for his comfort when he returned, and Charville controlled himself to answer, though the words almost choked him.

When luncheon was over, he opened the door, and silently beckoned to some one who was there, then, leaving the door ajar, came behind his mistress's chair, and said gravely

"My lady, there is bad news."

For a moment she sat as if turned to stone, then she rose up, and seizing him by the arm, shook him violently.

"It is Mr. Ronny!" she said, in one long moan, then tore out of the man's hand the orange envelope which it contained.

"Ronny wounded in duel, we fear fatally. Come at once.

"Yelverton,

"Hotel Bristol, Paris."

In one of those awful moments when the world reels, and we feel, know, realize, and endure a stupendous calamity, coming out on the other side with the mainspring of life broken, Lady Appuldurcombe's instinct pointed straight to Lesley, and with wild lips that shrieked out a bitter curse upon her, she fell like one smitten with palsy to the ground.

"Oh, my lady—my lady!" cried her old housekeeper, trying to raise her up, "Mr. Ronny is not dead—while there's life there's hope!" and she wiped the deathly brow, and helped Charville to lay their mistress on the sofa where she rested scarcely a moment, with feverish energy bidding them call the carriage, and pack her travelling-bag at once, for she must set out that very moment to her boy.

In ten minutes all was ready, and with Charville on the box, and her maid beside

her, Lady Appuldurcombe had started, at the last moment beckoning the housekeeper to approach her.

"Go and tell Miss Cynthia," she said, "tell her gently. She—she loved him. And if she will come here, bring her, and take care of her. I—I do not know when I may return. If—if Mr. Ronny is dead——"

She pulled up the window sharply, and made a sign that the coachman was to drive on.

"And if Mr. Ronny is dead," said Mrs. Crockett, looking through tears after the carriage, "I will never see my lady alive again."

But in the hot July sunshine she shivered, for the mother's curse on Lesley still thrilled horribly in her ears, for, as all men know—

> "Beneath . . the mother's curse
> No child could ever thrive;
> A mother is a mother still,
> The holiest thing alive."

And poor Miss Lesley had meant no harm. She was full of pranks and play, but had a heart of gold, as all about her knew; and if the gentlemen chose to quarrel about her, how was she to blame? For Mr. Ronny loved her—Charville was sure of it.

CHAPTER XXV.

Cynthia had heard the news, and sat beside her unburied dead, a great hush and silence all about her, and in her spirit peace, and something of that awe that is more than peace, and passeth human understanding.

For Ronny would never belong to any woman now, therefore was he hers by divine right of love, and her claim upon him was not to be gainsaid. She would not know the anguish of seeing Lesley warm herself by the heart-blaze that none other had been able to kindle; and the memory of him would be hers, and his grave would be hers, and by the vividness of her memory of him when all else had forgotten, should she establish her right to meet him, when she, too, should cross the bar.

And the calm happiness of the face from which she presently drew the linen, and stood looking down on, seemed to promise an equal peace to Ronny; and Death seemed a friend and a comforter to the girl, as she kissed her mother's little dumpy, folded hands, and, still shrouded in that curious calm, sat there

hour after hour, alone.

* * * * * *

Luncheon was barely over when a messenger came, bringing a verbal request that Lesley would go over to Lady Cranstoun at once in the dog-cart then waiting; and, fearing fresh illness, the girl ran up to her room for a hat, to be followed by Nadege, who rushed at her with all the insane joy of her class at being the first to communicate evil tidings.

"Oh, miss!" she said. "Poor Mr. Ronny! I expect he's dead by now."

Lesley stopped, as one pierced in full flight by the archer, as cold, as dead, as in that moment she saw Ronny lying before her.

"Oh, miss," cried the fool, "don't take on so! It's only his spine—not his heart; and p'r'aps he'll live as a cripple many a day yet."

Ronny a cripple!—Ronny, who rejoiced in his every muscle, and put it to such splendid use . . . and if he were a dying man, or a cripple, might not she go to him? Ay, but he was Cynthia's dying man, *her* cripple—what Lesley had given, that she might not take back.

"How did you hear it?" she said hoarsely. "It was an accident?"

"A duel, miss—it's all in the papers," said the girl glibly, an eager mouthpiece of cal-

amity in dainty cotton and cambric, "with Sir Graham Dashwood. They say it's about a lady—and the baronet's dead, and Mr. Ronny's shot in the back."

"Bring me the paper," said Lesley, who had not moved an inch from where she had stood when struck; and was standing there still, when the pretty *soubrette* came in with a whirl of lilac skirts and delirious thrills of enjoyment.

Lesley read the paragraph through, then vaguely put her hand to her head—she wanted something, she did not know what; and then she remembered it was her hat, and that she must get to Lady Cranstoun—Lady Cranstoun, who *knew*. She got it at last, still without speaking, and walked downstairs and out to the cart, quite steadily, driving swiftly and well; but she saw nothing during the short drive, nothing but Ronny's face with the look that she had passed by. She would never see it there again; and she might have answered it when he was going, on her account, to his death. For that the two men had fought on her account, she was morally certain, and probably he thought that she knew it when she ran away.

And then Lady Appuldurcombe, brought to the bar of God, and punished for her idol-

atry of her boy, came before her, torn with anguish, and darkened with hatred for the cuckoo in the nest who had brought about the whole tragedy.

When she got to Lady Cranstoun's side, for awhile the two women looked into each other's faces without speaking, and all the little coldness that had come between them, gone; but no love could assuage, no tenderness soften the stony calm in which Lesley was enfolded.

"Cranstoun came and told me; he got letters from town. And then there were the papers, which I had not seen. But men have been shot in the back. and recovered dearest——"

"Oh," cried Lesley, flinging out her arms wide, "what did I do—what did I do? I gave her Ronny whole, and wilful, and just a man, he *can't* be hers now he is dying, or dead. Would it be dishonourable, mean, if I went to him now? If I just said to him, 'Living or dead, I *love* you, Ronny, I *love* you.' "

The passion, the truth, the loveliness of pure love, rang out in her voice, and spoke in every fibre of her quivering body, and Lady Cranstoun said to herself that, let any other woman love Ronny as she would, she could never touch Lesley.

"You can't go to him, dear," said Lady Cranstoun, gently, "and even if you could, his mother——"

"Why should they fight about me?' cried Lesley. "I had done nothing to the man, except refuse to know him."

"Which was enough," said Lady Cranstoun, "and of course he took his revenge; it is always the men we won't allow to make love to us, who take our characters away. The complaisant woman has in time of trouble armed men who start up from every bush."

"If they fought yesterday," said Lesley, throwing her mind back to the events of the few preceding days, "he must have crossed on Monday—the day I ran away from Park Lane—and he must have known all about it on Sunday when he—he——"

She stopped abruptly, and pushed the dark locks from her brow.

"I wonder if Cynthia has gone?" she said. "We need not have made such a bargain, need we?" she added, laughing queerly. "And as you said, we reckoned without the man—without the man! Oh, if he is dead, if Ronny is dead, I will plant flowers over him, they shall be in a pattern, and the words shall be—

"'Many a heart no longer here,
Ah! was all too inly dear,
Yet, oh, love! 'tis thou dost call——'"

She staggered, and threw up her arms, falling in a heap by the couch, and for once Nature was merciful. and gave her complete oblivion.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Lord Malincourt received with his shaving water the following morning, a dreadful letter—a dreadful letter—there was no other word for it, and he could not put it by as nonsense, since he had always avowed Jane Appuldurcombe to be the only woman of sense in his wife's family his wife, of course, excepted.

Categorically, by bell, book, and candle, for all her haste, as she wrote in the train on her way to Dover, Lady Appuldurcombe arraigned Lesley on the charge of deliberately fomenting a quarrel between her son, Ronald Kilmurry, and Graham Dashwood, till a duel was inevitable, of running away like a coward when the train was laid, and detection imminent, and of having in pure wantonness provoked the love of the son to whom Jane Appuldurcombe was now hurrying, expecting to find him dead on her arrival.

Lord Malincourt's lips whitened as he read, it was the old story, and "Si non e vero, e ben trovato," rang insistently through his

mind, as he dressed, for why had Lesley come back so pale, so altered, in such violent haste, too, unless she had left some serious wrong-doing behind her?

The sickening pain that only a child's misconduct—never that of a father or mother—can bring to a man's heart, contracted Malincourt's then; yet, when downstairs, Lesley came up to kiss him as usual, leaning her forehead for a moment against his shoulder, he swore stoutly to himself that one tale is good till another is told, and he would hear her version of things before accepting Jane Appuldurcombe's. Yet Cecilia had never embroiled herself and him like this, being, indeed, the product of a different epoch, though it was surely Lesley's own fault that she *must* make herself altogether delightful to whomsoever she found in her company, be it man or woman.

So perturbed was he, that for once he ate next to no breakfast, a fact alarming in itself, since it seems to be part of the Almighty's scheme of creation that man shall sleep and eat through everything—possibly that he may be able to bear heroically the burden of—woman.

"Dad," said Lesley, going up to him presently with the cool courage that never de-

serted her, her eyes like blue stars in the pallor of her face, "you've heard about Ronny Kilmurry this morning, and you think it is my fault—don't you?"

Lord Malincourt disinterred the unwelcome epistle from his breast-pocket, and gave it to her without a word. But his glance was a tower of strength to Lesley, who stopped to kiss him before she unfolded the letter, and read through quite calmly from beginning to end, then she said simply—

"You know better, Dad. I *did* refuse to recognize Sir Graham Dashwood, whose manners are an insult to any woman; but I did not know Ronny had challenged him. And I ran away, Dad, because"—she turned aside, and hid her face in her hands—"I had fallen in love with Ronny, and given him up to another woman, who loved him before I did, but not better, Dad—oh, not better!"

Lord Malincourt swallowed something in his throat, as he put a strong arm gently round the girl's shoulders; but it trembled, for he seemed to see Cecilia in the bowed head, the young shape—Cecilia, as she had told him that she could not love *him,* because a town spark had caught her fancy—and the town spark had married an ugly woman with a million of money—and he, Bob, had mar-

ried Cecilia, and made her happy. And now her child must go through with the same suffering.

"Lassie, my dear," he said, "I wish I could help you to bear it." And he *did* help her, as the first tears she had shed since the fatal news came, fell on his breast.

"She is his mother," said Lesley, presently, "I forgive her. But it *was* rather a mistake sending me to town—wasn't it, Dad?" she added, lifting her face, hopeless with the hopelessness of youth, whose eyes are yet unopened to life's horizon and its infinite scope.

"I guessed you would be up to mischief, Lassie," he said sadly, "and I did wrong. You never were one to ride on the curb; but I never dreamed it would end in such trouble as this. In my opinion, however, your Ronny will not die. To be alive at all after his injuries is a miracle, and who is to know the miracle may not continue?"

Lesley stood looking down for a while, deep in thought. At last she looked up and said—

"Dad, you'll keep Bob away for a day or two—*won't* you? Say I'm dead—offended—anything—only keep him away. You see, *I've* got to suffer now, and two of a trade never agree!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

Lady Cranstoun had wired for news to Yelverton, and every day a fresh bulletin came, no good news, and no bad. Ronny was still alive, but he might die at any moment, it was impossible to say how things would turn out.

These telegrams were supplemented by laborious letters, for, like most of his class, Yelverton was a bad penman, and a worse speller, and the major part of his endeavours consisted in entreating that Lady Cranstoun would not let Lesley worry herself, as it wasn't her fault, or anybody's fault, but that unmentionably disgraceful blackguard's—Dashwood.

Lady Appuldurcombe, he said, was bearing up well. She would rather have her darling's broken pieces to tend, than any whole person whomsoever; and, if Ronny died, she would have the comfort of knowing that all his last hours had been hers, and he had died in her arms. There had been some talk of Cynthia's coming over, as, by Lady de Salis's death, Ronny's mother was left practically in charge of the girl, but nothing was settled

yet, as Ronny was exceedingly anxious to get home.

Lesley had heaps of puck, and pulled herself together so grandly, that no one save Lady Cranstoun guessed the supreme effort it cost her. She was a little more particular over her hair and toilette; a little sharper with her tongue; she went more than ever among her poor; visited and received visits from the county, and left no moment of the day idle if she could help it. It was only when at night she stretched out her limbs to rest, that Ronny's face stole on her out of the darkness, not dead, not dead, thank God! but pallid, with its love blurred by agony—and then a woman's warm face filled the space beside his, drawing him with every hour further away from chilly darkness, into her own orbit of love and tender cherishing—and the truth of Cynthia's cry, that it were better to be Ronny's dog than another man's idol, rang in Lesley's ears, and the fires of jealousy blazed wildly up in her heart, and for awhile made a madness in her brain.

Yet through all her anguish ran like a silver thread the thought that he lived, that all was well, since the worst had not happened, and some day—some day, though perchance from afar off, she might look upon his beloved

face again.

Bob had behaved splendidly, and when Lord Malincourt told him the truth, and that Lesley was best left alone for a time, suggesting to the young man a short absence—say to Homburg—Bob decided to go; but before doing so, came over to Malincourt to say good-bye.

"I wish I could bear it for you," he said, setting his teeth hard as he looked into her changed face; "but if I stayed, perhaps I should only worry you; so I'm going."

"Yes," said Lesley, feeling that she had never liked him so well as then. "When I see you, my punishment seems harder; it *is* a punishment for all the harm I've done."

Bob shook his head.

"He loves you," he said; "no one could help loving you who had the chances of seeing you as he had—living in the same house, and he may recover, after all. You never loved me, dear, and you never will. So, if he dies, he is rich as I never was."

"No," she said, "but I did love you—almost. Perhaps, if Dad hadn't sent me to town—however, if he does get well, it's nothing to me—nothing. He belongs to another woman. I've *got* to suffer, Bob; I've *got* to have it out, as you did."

But Bob, as he kissed her hand and went away, remembered only that word "almost." It went with him to Homburg; it dwelled with him as a sweet morsel by night and day, and girls had broken their hearts before now, and other men had mended them, and he would be patient, even if he had to wait forever.

And when Bob came no more, Lesley missed him, and wept for the waste of love and treasure he had poured out upon her, wept for her own treasure that might go down with Ronny to the grave, and the days dragged heavily, and all the inconsequence, the gaiety of youth, that had so distinguished her in town, were far indeed from her now.

We all have to pay heavily some time or other for being happy, and Lesley's time for payment, in one huge draft, was then.

Lord Malincourt had answered Jane Appuldurcombe's cruel letter in a manly, dignified way that might have shamed her, then decided not to excuse the accused, and destroyed it. So that when Ronny, too, fiercely silenced her when she spoke of the girl, the mother fell back for comfort on Cynthia, who, perhaps had the best reason to love Lesley of them all.

It was more on her own account than Cynthia's, that Lady Appuldurcombe had sent

for the girl, and to Ronny it mattered nothing, and less than nothing, as he lay all day in his darkened chamber, taking no interest in anything but the post.

"Do you think she is ill, Yelverton?" he used to say to his faithful friend, who, in those early August days, seldom left him for long together. "She is very highly strung, and, perhaps, the news gave her a shock? And some brute or other"—he little knew who the brute was—"may have been making out it was her fault, when it was nothing of the sort."

But he had almost given up expecting a word or kind message from her now, and so far as he knew, she cared less than nothing for the state to which she had brought him; it would be to vitiate the whole spirit of her agreement with Cynthia to communicate in any way with him, argued Lesley, whose loyalty burnt with so clear and pure a flame as to shrivel up all her own most passionate desires.

Yelverton invented every possible excuse for Lesley's silence, which, nevertheless, he could not in the least understand.

If Ronny loved her, and she him, what then was the hitch between them? Lesley had seemed to be the sort of girl to scorn appear-

ances, and fly straight to the man she loved in his hour of need; but was she, after all, the flinty-hearted young woman her Somersetshire lovers one and all declared her to be?

"Perhaps it's Bob," said Ronny at last, when he had exhausted every conjecture as to her silence; but it so happened that one day Roger saw Sir Robert Heatherly's name among the arrivals at Homburg, so *that* anxiety at least was removed from Ronny's mind.

"Yelverton," said Ronny one day, "I want to get home; so does the poor mother. If I've got to lie on my back for the rest of my life, I can do it as well at home as in this grilling Sahara. Can't they move me somehow?"

"Yes," said Yelverton, "but not immediately; it will be another fortnight or so. These French doctors don't agree about your case, and want you to have English care. I shouldn't wonder, old chap, if you got up one of these days as well as ever you were, or at least——"

"Oh, I know," said Ronny, significantly. "Well, you're getting to look like a ghost, old man; and I want you to go home, and execute a commission for me. Take Miss Coquette down to Malincourt, and find out for me——"

"What a strange thing," exclaimed Roger, "I got a letter this morning from Lady Crans-

toun who lives almost next door to Malincourt, begging me to go there for as long as I can. She says she sees Lesley every day."

Ronny's eyes, big in his cavernous face, flashed.

"Go, Roger," he cried; "go at once! And you'll write me; no—wire—what she—how she——"

And that was why Yelverton accepted an invitation that had at first greatly puzzled him, and so it happened that one afternoon, late in the month, who should Lesley see dancing along under the trees but Miss Coquette, led by one of Lord Cranstoun's grooms, and, riding behind her, Roger Yelverton!

It was as though Miss Coquette, sniffing the air delicately, scented her beloved mistress, for before seeing her, she whinnied, and when the girl ran up, there was such a meeting between the pair, as left Yelverton quite out in the cold.

Perhaps he thought she had taken her punishment lightly, as she dashed into the house, then out again with sugar for the mare; but he knew this was not so, when presently, in the great entrance-hall, she lifted her eyes to his and said—

"Ronny?"

"I don't know," said Yelverton, simply;

"sometimes I think he will recover, and again——" he paused. "I'm stopping with the Cranstouns, you know; she invited me down, and Ronny asked me to bring you Coquette."

He paused again, he *had* to answer the question in her blue eyes, into which tears had come at Ronny's thought for her.

"I was on the box-seat," said Roger irrelevantly, "and Bobbie Burns was driving, when we turned that sharp corner into St. Helier's Barracks, and Bobbie fell under the coach, which literally passed over his back; yet after a time he recovered. There seemed to be no difference in him, except that he had the loveliest colour—just like a woman's—in his face; but years after, quite suddenly, he died. Ronny may recover, and die like Burns did—there's no knowing. Miss De Salis is there," he added; "she arrived the day before I left."

"And did he mind?" cried Lesley, a hot colour in her face flaring up jealously.

"He was too ill to—mind," said Yelverton sadly.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Lord Cranstoun did not in the least mind what his wife did, or who she received, so long as she expected neither his company nor his care; so when Roger Yelverton appeared, he made himself fairly agreeable, and only smiled sardonically as he reflected on the agreeable contiguity of Cranstoun Hall and Malincourt, for it was Lesley, of course; he did not pay his wife the compliment of supposing she could attract any man now.

Lady Cranstoun looked up with keen interrogation at Roger one afternoon, as he entered her boudoir, just returned from Malincourt.

"Well?" she said; but Roger, sitting down near her, did not immediately answer, there being evidently full comprehension between the pair.

"What made her father send her to town?" he broke out suddenly. "To see her there in her own home, and with him, is to understand why she broke on us all like the very spirit of youth and joy; and to look at her now!"

he ended, with a groan.

"It was a huge mistake," said Lady Cranstoun, "and even I have found, that for true happiness, sane enjoyment, you must look to the country, not town. Only you want one true heart beside you with which to enjoy it! And, perhaps, if Lesley had seen no one else, she might have settled down happily with Heatherly, whose only curse is that he is a very rich man, and so has been denied Ronny Kilmurry's chances of distinguishing himself."

"It is well that he used them," said Yelverton, gloomily, "for they are over now. To linger on, half dead, with the woman you want out of your reach, and the woman you don't want, nursing you, I can't think of any more awful fate."

"He will get used to his nurse, even to her red hair, and he will end by marrying her," said Lady Cranstoun, bitterly; "one comfort is, Cynthia de Salis looks her worst in black —she needs the illumination of flesh!"

This purely feminine gibe made Roger smile, though his heart was heavy.

"How fond you are of Lesley!" he said. "I can't call her anything else—to you. We started with clean breasts, you and I, and we must go on as we began."

Thus spake he in his man's ignorance, for Lady Cranstoun had told him nothing that he did not previously know, and had in no smallest way betrayed Lesley.

"I always knew," said Lady Cranstoun, "that you were her friend. And believe me, I have done her no harm. I only taught her a little worldly wisdom—in case she went out into the world—and evidently it was not enough, for she made enemies right and left by her straight-forwardness."

"She did. Do you remember Lady Picton—a woman's-club woman, who dresses like a man?"

"I know her. She looks like the Picture of Dorian Gray—latterly. Did *she* go for Lesley?"

"Yes. Lesley openly shrank from her; and a few women of the Picton sort, and Dashwood, and Kinski, made a dead set at her. Lesley had done nothing but take a morning walk to Covent Garden, which Malincourt had particularly enjoined on her. Ronny fell in with her quite by accident, and Dashwood happened to see them, and omit Ronny's name from the story. Ronny overheard him—hence the duel."

Lady Cranstoun's face showed wan as she leaned back against her white silk pillows,

for all this trouble had made her sadder than before. She was a brown—lovely woman, hair and hazel eyes and skin, all in most delicate gradations of colour, and Roger's heart contracted as he looked at her, remembering that she had once been almost as gay, and young, and pure as Lesley's self.

"I love her," she said, answering his glance. "I did not know there was such a girl in the world till I found Lesley. Somehow it's like passionately desiring to find Christ, and seeking Him in vain on the hilltops, only to find His spirit at last, animating a flower by the wayside." She coloured, and paused abruptly. What right had such words in her mouth?

"I can't understand it," said Yelverton; "she and Ronny quarrelled incessantly at first—she always thought he was sitting in judgment upon her, and thoroughly disapproving of her in every way—and then they got to understand one another better, and—and——"

"His fame had a little to do with it," said Lady Cranstoun. "It's folly to say a woman's opinion of a man is not influenced by the world's verdict on him; and she was a little dazzled, like the rest. And he looks at, and understands life as it is; he has *lived* it," she

added, "not as monks live it in the cloister, listening for the sound of the dinner-bell; not as we women endure it, barred out from realities, fed with untruths, closing our ears—if we would keep one shred of happiness—to the secrets that cry aloud to us from the other side of the screen, and *will* be heard; and it is such men as he, who stamp their image on women as keen and quick to feel, as highly vitalized, as Lesley Malincourt."

"But what am I to say to him?" inquired Yelverton, helplessly. "I have been here three days, and she simply won't hear me when I try to talk about him—only wants to know how his body is, and won't send a crust of comfort to his starving soul. 'Have you no message for him?' I said to her today. 'There is no message,' she said, and walked away. And I *must* write to him this afternoon. I asked him to let me give her that letter he wrote before the duel, but he refused: he couldn't ask her to tie herself to a cripple, he said. He only wants a message—just a kind word or two. It's my belief he would begin to get well if he got it! But he's too proud to ask for it. I want to know where the hitch is. It can't be Cynthia de Salis—hers is a twice-told tale—and it can't be Lady Appuldurcombe, though she hates Lesley like poison; so *what*

is it?"

But Lady Cranstoun either could not or would not tell.

Some wild thought of writing to Ronny and tell him the truth, crossed her mind, but she must break her word to Lesley; and even if she could bring herself to do this evil that good might come, of what use would it be? For Lesley was fast bound by her promise—a promise from which only Cynthia could release her.

"Perhaps she isn't sure of her own mind, after all," said Yelverton, who had been pursuing a different track of thought. "Half the love one hears of exists in the imagination alone: fancy goes a long way in such matters."

"Oh no," said Lady Cranstoun, positively; "love may be the effect of imagination in *absence* but not in actual presence; that is animal magnetism, pure and simple; the man's personality has set a torch to the girl's thoughts, her thoughts have not produced *him*."

Yelverton got up restlessly, and looked out of the window.

"Have you seen Jem Churchill lately?" he said, quite forgetting, in his preoccupation, Lady Cranstoun's position in the county.

"Oh," she said dryly, "don't you know that the people about here are almost as provincial as the English who have lived in the East? And now, if you don't mind looking up Cranstoun, I think I must rest—perhaps doze awhile."

She closed her eyes, then opened them suddenly to see the look of kindliest pity with which he regarded her, as he opened the door to pass out.

"And some day," she said softly, "and may that day come soon, I shall forget to wake up—only I shall not be able to say, as Maurice de Saxe did, in dying, 'Doctor, life is only a dream—mine has been very short, but it has been a pleasant one!' For only a man could say *that!*"

CHAPTER XXIX.

"Cranstoun Hall, Friday.

"DEAR OLD CHAP," wrote Yelverton in his round, schoolboyish hand, "I brought Coquette down all right, and Miss Malincourt was delighted to see her; they make just as pretty a pair as ever. Lord Malincourt is awfully kind, and I spent a lot of time over there, as Lady Cranstoun is a great invalid, and Cranstoun and I don't cotton to one another at all. Miss Malincourt always inquires for you. She is very much altered, and I am sure feels your accident very much. Let me know if there is anything settled about your returning, and I will run up to town to meet you. Lord Malincourt has asked me to come for the First—I like him immensely. Please remember me to your mother, and Miss De Salis.

"Sincerely yours,

"ROGER YELVERTON."

"She is very much altered"—that was the only bit Ronny remembered out of all Roger's

bald, halting sentences, and it brought comfort to his aching heart. Why was she altered if she did not care? He had not been at all sure up to now, that she did not care, for a more elusive woman than Lesley did not live, and never more elusive than when you thought you had caught her; and then came thoughts to dash his comfort from him, for what if her father's and his mother's bullyings, following on the natural shock of his accident, might not be held accountable for any such change in her as Yelverton noticed?

She might have sent him one word, one little word; it would not have hurt her, and what good would it not have done *him!*

He had been carried into the sitting-room for the first time that day, as a sort of preparation for the move homeward to be made in a few days, and his mother had gone out to procure him some difficult-to-obtain luxury, and only Cynthia was there, leaning her head against the woodwork of the open window—a cool and restful figure in her soft white gown.

Beneath the awning, one saw all the arid desolation of Paris in August, Paris as she is under the Commune, stripped of her royal robes, yet with her bubbling bourgeois gaiety hardly quenched in her yet.

"Cynthia," he said, in a tone of a brother who has no need to pretend to the friendliness that he and his sister are well aware of, "I have some news of Lesley at last."

"Of Lesley?" cried Cynthia, springing up, unable to keep the light out of her face that Lesley knew how to bring into so many, and it was a fact that Cynthia loved only one other person in the whole world—and that was Ronny.

"Yelverton says that she is much altered," said Ronny, his gaunt face turned away from the light, so that he did not see the change in Cynthia's as she stood there, guilty, ashamed, thinking how Ronny would hate her if he knew the truth.

She had not written one line to Lesley—how could she? Having accepted that supreme sacrifice from the other woman, how could she seek her with fair words that meant nothing? For she knew now, or surely guessed, that Lesley had not parted lightly with a bauble that had never pleased her, but with her whole life treasure—else she too would have written.

"It must have come as a great shock to her," she said dully; and then it suddenly occurred to Ronny, why, since the girls had been such friends, did they not correspond now?

Almost, not quite, he stumbled on the truth; Cynthia saw it dawning in his eyes, and exclaiming, "It is time for your medicine!" brought it to him, lifting his head on her strong young arm as she did so, in a matter-of-fact way that showed she had done so many times.

A little colour came into his face as she gently laid him back, and he looked at her with the affection that had come gradually to replace his old dislike of her; even that scent of violets did not worry him now.

"Sit down here," he said, touching a seat near him; and she sat down, knowing what was expected of her, what would make her company sweet and desirable—that she should talk of Lesley.

They never talked of anything else, these two, when alone together—of what she had said, how she had looked, of the hundred-and-one things she had done in the brief season that had ended so disastrously, but save as his lovely cousin, of whom he was intensely proud, no allusion to her passed Ronny's lips.

And so it had come to pass that Cynthia was associated with the few bright hours of Ronny's illness, not his mother, to whom he dared not speak of Lesley. His mother, who had yet come to know that to nurse, to watch

over, to cherish what one loves, even if one must lose it at last, is the divinest solace of human suffering vouchsafed to a human soul. The very bitterness of death itself is missed when we know we have smoothed the way for our beloved, and borne his feet up tenderly, as he traversed its dark places.

Presently Ronny said, "I shouldn't wonder if Lesley married Yelverton after all."

"Why?"

"He is such a good fellow, and so devoted to her, and often it's the dark horse that wins. I don't think Bob was ever really in the running."

"You must sleep now," she said gently; and quite naturally his cold, thin hand wandered towards her young warm ones, and with it fast held in both of hers, that pale shadow of Ronny the hero slept.

Thus Lady Appuldurcombe found them on her return an hour later: so might a weary man, overborne in the fight, rest awhile, with love, strong and beneficent, to watch over him; so might a woman look who asked no return for her devotion, so absolutely content was she with the joy and blessedness of giving.

CHAPTER XXX.

Lord Malincourt had found himself a good deal cut off from his kind, or rather such company as he liked, by Lesley's ill-treatment of his neighbours, so that Yelverton came as a real boon to him, and was speedily made very much at home in the place. And Lord Malincourt, with his cheery ways and robust personality, was like a refreshing tonic just then to Yelverton, whose kind, ugly face had grown sharp and pale with anxiety during the past few weeks.

"Lassie," said her father one day, shaking his head at her, "I'm afraid here is another of them," to which Lesley responded earnestly—

"Dad, he was the only one of them who *didn't* make love to me, that's why I'm so fond of him!"

Lord Malincourt sighed ruefully.

"It seems to me," he said, "that whether they make love to you, or whether they don't, your tender mercies to them are pretty much

the same."

And, indeed, when at church, which in the country is a kind of roll-call, where every one who can, answers to his name, and comes up for judgment, putting on his very best appearance too, lest in the interval between last and this Sunday he be suspected of injurious deeds, Roger Yelverton, ugly and distinguished, dropped into the place beside her in the square pew, he was accepted by most of those present as the latest town captive of Miss Lesley's bow and spear, and their engagement regarded as an accomplished fact.

That he was utterly devoted to her could be seen with half an eye, also that she really liked him, by the way even that she gave him a hymn-book; yet there was a look of strain on her face, and if more lovely, the spontaneity and thoughtlessness of youth seemed for the time to have utterly left her, whereat many folks puzzled, the more especially that, when dear and familiar words sounded in her ears, there were moments when Lesley looked absolutely *good*, when all her tricks fell from her, and one felt and knew she was true, as no impeccably virtuous person ever was, or could be, and real heart-sunshine radiated from, and made her lovely, in the best sense of the word.

More than one man of the neighbourhood who had loved Lesley, watched the pair closely each Sunday, for Yelverton made a long stay, coming over from Cranstoun with his traps to Malincourt for the First, and only running up to town occasionally to see Ronny, who had safely performed the journey to Park Lane.

And Lesley had less time to think, now that the house was half full of her father's guests, and she was wanted by the housekeeper constantly, but she made an opportunity all the same, while the men were abroad, to ride over on Coquette every day to Lady Cranstoun, who was full just then of a weary, sick revolt against everything, so that she was angry and out of patience with Lesley herself even.

"Are you determined to ruin his life as well as your own?" she cried out indignantly, towards the end of the first week in September; "have you the *right*, even if you have the power? Upon my word, for two women to calmly settle a man's future for him, without his being allowed the smallest voice in the matter, is taking an unwarrantably great liberty with him—or so *I* consider it!"

"He will settle it for himself," said Lesley, coldly.

"For himself!" groaned Lady Cranstoun;

"worn out, the ghost of a man, his will-power almost, if not quite gone, from pure weakness, and a woman always at his elbow, to whom he is bound to attach himself, as a helpless child to its indispensable nurse, what free-will, what power of choice has he in the matter? You two are simply taking a base, cruel advantage of him—one for which, if he ever recovers, he will hate and despise the accomplices who have brought him to such a pass!"

"Lady Cranstoun!" cried Lesley, starting to her feet with flaming face.

"It's perfectly true. If he were himself, if he were just a selfish, strong man with a will of his own, I would say, 'Let Cynthia do what she likes, and let him defend himself,' but as he is, it is like taking advantage of a child. In his shivering coldness and poorness of blood, he will feel a comfort in her warmth, and bountiful, generous organization, he will even get used to the red in her hair—a colour you say he detests; but mark me, Lesley, *when he recovers,* as I believe he will, it will be an evil day for Cynthia and for you."

"And you think he *will* recover?" cried Lesley, joyously. "Oh! I could bear it all—all—to see Ronny in the saddle again, for he could never be quite unhappy so long as

there is a horse left in the world!"

Lady Cranstoun shook her head.

"Lesley," she said, "sometimes to be unselfish is a vice, and you are vicious now. You think only of Ronny, but what of the hell you will make for the man you marry, loving Ronny as you do?"

"I don't mean to marry."

"You can't help it. Who knows? It *may* be Roger Yelverton. It never will be Bob."

Lesley laughed.

"There is not a man alive who could coax or bully me into marrying him," she said. "I could never understand Tess of the D'Urbervilles going back to that man, when once she had loved Angel. I would have let all my family bivouac in the churchyard, or go to the Union; but having once loved, I could not even *think* of belonging to any one else."

"So we all say and think when we are young," said Lady Cranstoun, wearily, "but there comes a time in a woman's life, when, if she cannot have love, at least she wants the comfort, the support of a man's arm; and when old maids like you are in season, Lesley, then young wives will be cut out of bloom. And, of course, you may not get the support after all—only a rotten stick that snaps as you lean on it," she added, thinking of Crans-

toun.

"If only he gets well, I don't care," said Lesley, her eyes shining; "the doctor's last report is certainly a shade better."

"Poor man!" said Lady Cranstoun, dryly. "I should say the tortures of the Inquisition were child's play to those you have imposed on poor, helpless Ronny. Console yourself with the thought that he is bound to succumb at last! There, good-bye, child, I am too tired and cross to talk any more today;" and she almost pushed Lesley away as the girl stooped to kiss her.

CHAPTER XXXI.

When Lesley went out with the men's luncheon one day, it was to find an unexpected addition to the party in Bob Heatherly, who reached her side about the same time as Yelverton, whereupon Bob glared at the new man, whose air of easy appropriation was tacitly acquiesced in by Lesley, though why this was, she could not, taken by surprise as she was, have told.

"How do you do, Bob?" she said, with an effort, "and did you meet many people you knew at Homburg?" then passed on with Yelverton to attend to her duties as hostess in the little inn, which happened to be the men's feeding-ground that day.

"Irish stew for a treat," he heard her saying next to Yelverton. "I know how all you men love it;" and then the hungry sportsmen came trooping into the long, narrow room, and every man called for his own particular vanity in drink, and there was a smart fusillade of talk, in which Lesley, greatly improved in health and spirits since Bob had

seen her last, took her part ably.

"Was Yelverton the cause?" Bob asked himself, as he ate game pie, and refused the stew Lesley pressed on him. "And if so—well, *Lesley* to succumb to a man with a flaxen head as smooth as a billiard-ball, and a mug like——!" but here comparison failed him.

He had heard a lot about "The Lovely Malincourt," as they called her, from all the Town contingent at Homburg, of her successes, her frolics, her lovers, of the imbroglio into which she was credited with having got her cousin, of how Yelverton had parted with, or given her, Miss Coquette, of how entirely devoted to her he was, so that when he heard how Yelverton was at Malincourt, he made haste to return, thinking that if she could put up with one man's company, she as easily might with another's.

Most of those present were old friends of Lord Malincourt, living at a distance, and quite unaware of those tricks of Miss Lesley that so severely limited her father's shooting lists, and if they, one and all, admired the young beauty, no harm was done, even though their lawful and middle-aged owners might not altogether have approved—only they did not know.

"He is very good-looking," said Yelverton,

aside, in an interval of stew; "got a devil of a temper, too, I should say," he added, getting no reply, while Lord Malincourt, glancing from one to the other of the two men, had some disagreeable qualms that made the flavour of his corned beef, and beloved bitter ale, less agreeable than usual.

When they all presently trooped out, Lesley announced her intention of driving instead of walking home, which was the exact opposite of what had been her intention. As she settled herself in the dog-cart, slim and smart in her light checked tweed, with all her accessories perfect, as usual, she glanced swiftly at the two men, standing side by side, and Yelverton pleased her taste best, for he had that indefinable air of birth and breeding, impossible, it would seem, to be acquired without freely mixing in the very best and worst society in the world. Yet how handsome Bob was, how angry! Anger in some men is like the determining touch of colour that a woman who has made a fine art of painting, gives to her cheek, and anger became Bob, Lesley decided, as she invited him to dinner, and wished angrily that he had not come back.

When she had gone, the two moved off side by side to the coverts, whence the sound of

shots came in rapid succession, covering their distaste to each other's company, after the manner of their kind, with tobacco.

A little spring babbled along, somewhere out of sight for company, the firs gave out their magical odours, and all the glories of the year, trembling in its perfected beauty on the verge of decay, appealed not at all to these stubborn silent mortals, who saw and heard nothing but their desires, and the selfish beats of their own hearts. "Love is for an hour or day, but I am here always," whispered Nature; but they would not listen. Just out of earshot of the sportsmen, Bob paused, and touched Roger's arm significantly.

"I was engaged to Miss Malincourt," he said.

"You have the advantage of me," said Yelverton, stiffly, "for I only hope to be."

For a moment, in the shadow of the red-spotted leaves of the old thorn, a collision seemed inevitable between the two angry men; then Yelverton, mastering himself by a great effort, said—

"Look here, I take back that speech. Miss Malincourt don't love either of us; she never will. And the only good turn we can do her is—to be her very good friends and leave her alone. May not a woman choose for herself?

And, by Heaven, I hope I'm man enough to think of what's best for *her,* not me!"

They had come up with the beaters by now, and went different ways, but both shot wildly, and covered themselves with disgrace that afternoon. For though each knew that she loved some one else better, each swore in his heart to be the second best after—Ronny.

CHAPTER XXXII.

Lady Appuldurcombe had Park Lane all to herself, like some desert island, and she had Ronny all to herself, and was happy in a way that seemed to her quite extraordinary, and with Ronny's real, but very slow, improvement, she found it in her heart to partly forgive Lesley, and to be heartily ashamed of that dreadful letter she had sent Malincourt. To be sure, the heartlessness of the pair of them in making no inquiries for Ronny, almost excused her attitude towards them, still she had undoubtedly been hasty, and, in any case, Lesley, and primarily, her father, were to blame for Ronny's accident.

Yet Lady Appuldurcombe would have given a good deal to wipe out both her curse on the girl, and her letter; and it was of this she was thinking one afternoon, as from her boudoir window she gazed out on the full glory of the park, now reserved for the exclusive enjoyment of those toiling millions who do not go out of town in September, and wondered what she could do to set her mis-

take right.

Yelverton was very curt with her when he came—it was extraordinary how loyal all the men who loved Lesley were to her—and Malincourt had replied to her letter with that most terrible of all replies—silence; and, in this case, silence meant indignation and contempt.

But today, from an old friend now staying with her husband in Somersetshire, Lady Appuldurcombe had received, quite at the end of a long, chatty letter, the following item of intelligence:—

"So your niece, The Lovely Malincourt, as we called her in town—and a more natural, delicious creature I never met, so distinguished too—is to marry Roger Yelverton, who is now at Malincourt, and all the men who wanted to annex her—and they are legion here—are in despair. Not such a good match for her, after all; but that is the last thing she would think of. They say there is bad blood between him and Sir Robert Heatherly, whom she formerly favoured; but I do hope there are to be no more duels about her. She is so much too good for that sort of thing."

Lady Appuldurcombe thought of the girl's winning ways—how she really could not help being different to other girls—*natural,* in

short, as her friend had put it—and she had not wanted to come to town—and Ronny had been unwise to notice what a ruffian like Dashwood said about her.

She turned impatiently away from the window. She would go and look after Ronny and Cynthia in the drawing-room—the two who had grown so friendly in these past weeks; and, after all, thought the mother, with a sharp pang, would it not hurt her every whit as much to give Ronny up to one woman, as another?

She went abruptly into the room, and, as she entered, caught the name of "Lesley," which, strangely enough, was the talisman, the bond between these two, and a sudden access of temper, almost of cruelty, common to the best and worst of women, when jealous, seized her, as, going forward, she said—

"You are talking of Lesley? And I was just coming to tell you some news about her!"

She did not look at the couch drawn well out of the light, upon which Ronny lay, at the girl who had risen from the low chair at his side, a bitter sense that since he was no longer *her* Ronny now, it mattered little if he were Cynthia's or Lesley's, and that, in any case, his condition was Lesley's work, made her voice sharp, as she said—

"She is going to marry Roger Yelverton. Mary Stourbridge, who has been dining at Malincourt, has written to tell me so."

She moved to the balcony. The silence in the room was absolute. Then, still cruel, Lady Appuldurcombe left the balcony, and, without a glance at Ronny, went away.

Cynthia kneeled down beside him, and his deathly face, damp with sweat, was turned towards her.

As he looked at her, so good, so true, no whit altered to him by his great calamity, only loving him the more for it, strangely enough the very line flashed through his mind that once had formed the subject of a prayer in hers—

"Sweet as your smile shone on me ever." . . .

for with both of them it was a favourite song, and her smile had never failed him as child and woman—a quick revulsion against Lesley, against her heartlessness, her caprice, her inability even to wait to see if recovery were possible to him, flashed through Ronny, and, with a low groan, his head sought Cynthia's breast. Those moments of physical weakness, of heart desertion, accomplished what no effort of stubborn will to love gratefully could have done—for with the instinct of a tired child to its nurse, of escaping from

pain to a haven of warm forgetfulness—Ronny's arms closed feebly but lovingly about the girl, and with his lips seekings hers, he fell suddenly into a long sleep.

And so, with her cripple safe in her strong young arms, no more an outcast, Cynthia entered, for at least a little space, into love's kingdom, and knew heaven.

"What the eye don't view, the heart don't rue," says the proverb. Had she seen Lesley's suffering, had even one cry been wrung from the girl's proud lips, Cynthia might have found strength to give Ronny up to her; but she did not see, she did not know, and now Lesley's engagement to Yelverton proved that it had been Roger, not Ronny, who had her heart all along, or she would not have thrown over all the rest, Bob included, for him.

That afternoon she wrote to Lesley. It was the first communication to pass between them since the compact in Grosvenor Place.

"Appuldurcombe House, Tuesday.

"I hear you are going to marry Roger Yelverton, Lesley," she said; "and I know you would not do it unless you loved him, and I pray God you may be happy. If Ronny ever recovers, we shall be married; if not, I have the privilege of waiting upon, of seeing him,

and that is all I ask. You know now what this means, since you have learned love at last. I hope we may meet soon, for I long to see you," she added, then crossed the words out.

It might be safe for Lesley to see Ronny; but for a long, long while it would not be safe that he should see her.

"Good-bye, and God bless you, Lesley," her letter concluded.

* * * * *

And broad awake, Ronny was thinking, with that ugly silhouette of his male attendant—so hatefully suggestive of weakness to the once strong man—showing at a distance.

"Oh, my God! what have I done—what have I done? What if she have set herself far apart from me—need I do the same by her? *'To reach a nerve far down and deaden it,'* she said once. Supposing that she *did* care—a little, and that now, in her reckless, wild way, she is trying to reach that nerve, to deaden it . . ."

He groaned aloud in his despair, and his attendant rose, thinking him in pain. Cynthia! Ronny lay for a long while regarding her image, which was not abhorrent to him now—even that faint scent of wood violets was merged in her strong, vivid personality.

He had clung to her as death clings to life, seeking to warm himself by her fire and strength; and his mother herself had not been able to give him that sense of safety, of comfort which, in his darkest hours, Cynthia had afforded. And now she was to be his nurse for life; and Lesley, swift and sure-footed, was to run before the wind like Atalanta, with Yelverton pursuing, and overtaking her; and, quailing before his future, a sudden silence spread over the chamber, and the attendant, rushing to his side, found that Ronny had fainted.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

I THINK that to most of us—nay! all of us who are healthy humans, there comes a time when, no matter how grievous the mental anguish beneath which we have almost sunk; no matter what physical torture we have undergone, we realize that all the time we thought Nature idle, she has been renewing in us the power to laugh, to enjoy; and, one fine day our hearts leap up, and lo! the world is dear and fair to us again, and the joy of life once more is quick within us.

Thus Lesley, waking on the morning that was to bring her Cynthia's letter, felt in altogether extraordinary spirits, and, wondering why, told herself that Ronny was alive, Ronny was getting better, and life was a beautiful thing; and she sat up in her bed, and thanked God for it from her soul, and in such a way as pleases Heaven.

And in that morning radiance, hope whispered that, as Ronny grew stronger, so would his masculine selfishness and will-power strengthen—for he was selfish, of course, or

he would not be a man—and it gave her a delicious thrill to think that he might bully-rag her, and lecture her again, some day; for they were dreadfully monotonous—Bob and Roger—unable to see a fault in her, so that her failings of temper, vanity, and what not, flourished to higher and more luxuriant proportions every day. And she *longed* to hear his kind voice saying, "Have you been a good girl, Lesley?" and to take his dear hand, and say, "Ronny, I have wanted you to keep me in order."

Perhaps he would never be able to get off his couch again—well, then, he coud not get married—and, maybe, ages hence, Cynthia would relent and send for her, and let her sit beside him, and she would say, "Ronny, why did you not write to me, or send me one little message by Roger, if you truly loved me?"

And he would say, "Lesley, I was too proud. You knew I loved you—and you ran away, not because of the duel, but because, as I thought then, you have not the heart to say cruel things, even if you do them—and, of course, I did not know you loved me. Are you quite sure now?"

And she would say, "Quite, quite sure, Ronny!' For, cripple or no, he would be the one strong man on earth who knew how to

rule, to guide her, to teach her all those sweets of yielding, as only a spirit proud as hers could appreciate.

Cynthia would be true to herself at last—she was too womanly to be aught else—and now that this deady fear of losing Ronny was rolled away like a stone from both their hearts, the woman who loved him might well and nobly give him up to the woman he loved—and she would do it! Oh yes; she would not be behindhand in generosity; and the gentle blood and breeding in her veins could not lie.

Across that rosy dream flitted Nadege with a cup of tea and a letter. At sight of the handwriting Lesley's heart leaped wildly up; after all she had not been "fey" that morning for nothing! Cynthia had learned unselfishness at last; she had come to see that not one woman could give, or the other take, what was Ronny's. With a smile of pure content, a delicious thrill of on-rushing joy, Lesley pressed the seal of the letter to her lips, waiting till Nadege should go, till she should be face to face with her great joy.

And so it was that in those few moments of pure content she forgot the long, hard winter of her suffering. Suddenly her heart had burst into full spring, and the lovely old miracle was recreated for her, and her alone, as

she bowed her head over the unopened letter, and for the second time that morning thanked God for life and all that love was bringing to make that life beautiful.

The door cosed; Nadege had gone. Lesley kissed the seal once more before she broke it. And then, for a long while in the room there was silence. Hearts make no sound in breaking.

* * * * *

"Roger," burst out Lesley, passionately, as they walked in the garden after breakfast, "I wish you would not look at me like that! What with you, and what with Bob, I declare I feel like a bone two hungry dogs are quarreling over!"

She undid her parasol with a flip that nearly broke it, and executed as near a flounce as a well-bred woman in a tailor-made skirt of white drill can, while with all her heart and soul she longed to say that Word which for Ronny's sake she had severely let alone since the day he had caught her saying it.

"I'm sure," said Roger, a good deal scared, but considerably aggrieved, "I never *looked* at you all breakfast time, though I saw you were upset about something. It can't be Ronny, for he's getting better every day."

"Oh! a great deal better," said Lesley, flip-

pantly, as she stopped to pick a late scarlet geranium that loudly asserted the supremacy of natural over artificial dyes. "He is getting quite frisky, in short—he is going to be married!"

"Good God!" cried Yelverton, stopping short; "then, Lesley, you have ruined three lives!"

"I? Oh no; it is Cynthia! Cynthia who cried for the moon—and has got it!" said Lesley, in a quick, uneven voice that matched her unbalanced walk and demeanour.

"You got it for her, you mean," said Roger, in profound concern; "and let me tell you, Lesley, that I consider Ronny by far the most ill-used out of the three! If you had not refused to have anything to do with him, he would not have fallen into the arms of his nurse. Poor chap! his accident was bad enough, but this is worse—and that's the hero whom every one envied!"

"He has no moral courage," flashed out Lesley. "He should have said no, *no*, a woman can't make a man marry her unless he likes!"

"You wouldn't send him a message, Lesley," said Roger, reproachfully; "it kept him back frightfully in Paris."

'And did he send *me* one?" she cried. "Did he even write to me, or say one word of love

to me in his whole life? Never! Not one!"

"You knew he loved you," said Roger, fighting his friend's battle toughly, for all the cowardly promptings of his own heart, "and you ran away from him, and of course he thought you had run to—Bob."

"And now he thinks I have run to you," cried Lesley, cruelly, "*you!*" Oh, I am not allowed to have the smallest voice in the matter! This morning, with Cynthia's announcement, of her own engagement, I received congratulations of mine with—you!"

Roger Yelverton coloured furiously all over his kind, ugly face.

"And I wish to God it were true!" he burst out in spite of himself. "But now I begin to understand. Did the hearing of this—*canard*—precede Ronny's imbecile subservience to circumstances—otherwise Cynthia?"

"I think so. And there go my last ideals—of a really strong man, and a really good woman. Heigho! I'll choose common Delft for my idols now."

She was walking so quickly he could barely keep up with her; the blue whirlwind of her eyes frightened him as she turned her glance upon him.

"I thought I had suffered all that a woman could," she said, "but it was nothing—noth-

ing to this. And he will come to love her in time, I suppose; for him even to *think* of such a thing is to pretty well insure his doing it. Oh, I shall go mad, mad, if I dwell on it! And only this morning I was so happy I thanked God, and it was a little too soon—too soon! Go away, Roger," she added more gently, "Dad and the other men are waiting for you. I shall be all right presently And don't offer me any sympathy—I can't bear it."

And he did not attempt to offer any, though his heart bled for her. He left the girl standing in the midst of her bright dahlia beds, knowing that no one on earth would persuade her into marrying him, or Bob, or any other man, and for all Ronny's physical prostration, something very like contempt for the hero filled his soul. Ronny might have known better, trusted both his friend and the woman he loved more, and yet there was something behind it all that Roger could not understand, for he was ignorant of that solemn pact made between two foolish girls, at the house in Grosvenor Place, more than two months ago, to Ronny's sorrow.

When the men had all gone, Lesley went up to her bedroom, and saw in a looking-glass the blue eyes, the little white face that was to be always her own now, never Ronny's, for

him to be proud of, and love, and kiss.

How had it come—this overmastering love for him? She could not tell. We do not know how life comes, how it goes—how the sun rises, but it is there. Beyond her own face she seemed to see Ronny's sunburnt one, with grey, coldish eyes, and the brown moustache that she had once told him was his stock-in-trade, but which could not hide the lines of his beautifully drawn, lovable mouth, and he had a cleft in his firm, clear-cut chin, and no man can escape his fate in a woman if he have that!

The fair brown of his curly head would have made a much better contrast to her own raven locks than Cynthia's chestnut one would do—in her white robe it suddenly struck Lesley that she bore an odd resemblance to Lady Hamilton's famous picture as Circe: there was the same long-limbed, nymph-like air about them both, they being more than common tall, and Lady Hamilton had lost her sweetheart too—her sweetheart first, and England's greatest hero after.

And then she sat down, and wrote to Cynthia. "May you both be happy," she said—"Ronny and you." That was all.

If a tear fell as she folded the sheet, and she was too blinded to see it; if the name she put

first revealed which of them was dearest to her heart, did Ronny, to whom those two lines were handed next day, guess the origin of that tear, the reason of that priority?

And Yelverton wrote: "Ronny, you're a fool. Why couldn't you wait?" And not a word more. And Ronny puzzled greatly over this, and for what seemed to him an eternity, no sign of any sort came from Malincourt.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Lesley announced Ronny's engagement that night at dinner with a flourish, with her first spoonful of soup too, as some new men had come down from town that afternoon, and she was afraid they would tell it first.

She looked neither at her father nor at Bob; but as several of the men present knew Ronny, and one or two Cynthia, there was a general buzz of talk over the news, in which no one noticed how queer Heatherly looked, though, in point of fact, he almost fainted.

"It's an old affair between them," said Holdcroft, "and she is a magnificent specimen of a woman, for those who like the subdued red-haired type."

"Too jealous," said a fair man present, shaking his Rufus head.

"Too faithful," said Lesley, calmly. "But I think they'll be very happy all the same. She will just devote her life to him, as he might have devoted his to horses, if——"

Holcroft smiled.

"My dear Miss Malincourt," he said, "Ronny Kilmurry will not need to marry a nurse—really. I happened to travel as far as Salisbury with Sir James, and pumped him thoroughly about Ronny's case. And this is what the great surgeon said."

He paused, and the whole table paused too. Even the servants, with dishes in their hands, stood listening.

" 'At eight o'clock this morning I made a thorough examination of him,' said Sir James, 'and Ronny Kilmurry will make a perfect recovery. It is purely a matter of time. The French doctors misunderstood the case. The bullet never penetrated further than the muscles. The wound became inflamed; but now the bullet is extracted, he has only to get up his strength, and this day six months you'll probably see him winning every big race as usual, fit as ever'."

"Thank God!" cried Yelverton from his heart, and the cry was warmly echoed round the table.

"This is news indeed to me," added Roger; "I haven't seen him for ten days, and though he never complained, I saw he had no hope of recovery whatever. Hurrah!"

And then his and Lesley's eyes met in a flash that said, "If Sir James had seen Ronny

yesterday, should we have got that news from Cynthia today?"

And Lord Malincourt's heart was heavy; he knew Lesley's face well by now, and what it had cost her to make that announcement with the supreme carelessness she did; knew too why her gown was even more perfect than usual tonight, and everything possible done to distract attention from her little white face.

"I wish she had less pluck," he said to himself, as he glanced round at the indifferent men, the picturesque comfort of the beautiful old dining-hall, and once more cursed his folly in sending out alone into the world, that tripping shape of youth and brightness who had come back to him a wan, sad-eyed woman. Lesley saw the shade on his face, and nodded across the table, and the nod meant that to stay here at Malincourt with the dear old Dad, who was better to her than any lover ever could be, was by no means such an ill portion; and when Bob and the rest of them realized that she meant to be an old maid, perhaps they would leave her in peace. And then a thought leaped through her like flame, and shame seized her at her selfishness, for in her preoccupation, the great, the glorious news about Ronny's recovery had been al-

most overlooked. To him, all was well; he would pass through the ante-chamber of suffering to the full life beyond that he loved; he would still be able to indulge the one great passion that hitherto filled his existence, and what was Cynthia, or Lesley, or any other woman in comparison with that?

And yet—but for Cynthia, but for Roger, and their hindering, the one of set purpose, the other inadvertently, why could not they two have been happy together? God sets but two players down to the great game of Love—the other woman, the other man, who hover malevolently about the board, do but hinder and spoil the game.

The old Stourbridge woman must have given Lady Appuldurcombe that bit of local gossip about Lesley's engagement to Yelverton—but need Ronny have acted upon it so soon, so indecently soon? For no one could have made him—it is for the man to take the initiative in all things, and Ronny was a real man, and could never be forced into anything.

"Bob," she said in the drawing-room later, "what is the matter with you—are you ill?"

"No."

He just looked at her worn young face, then away, and she questioned him no more, but her heart sank. That was the worst of Bob,

and made him so much more difficult to manage than Roger, that he loved her more vitally than Yelverton did. Yelverton was a man of the world and would recover; Bob, never.

Well, they were in the same boat now, and ought to be better friends—probably would be.

"Lassie," said her father, fiercely, as he wished her good night at the top of the stairs, "I don't think much of heroes," then went away quickly that she might not see the unaccustomed tears in his dear old blue eyes.

CHAPTER XXXV.

Yelverton had a father. If he had owned a mother, he could not for so long have closely devoted his attention to the affairs of other people, and not very long after his curt epistle to Ronny, he was sent for post haste to Yorkshire, only to find on arriving that his parent, who was in a hurry, had not been able to wait, and take a formal farewell of his heir.

It is thus, I think that most of us depart, not with all our boxes nicely packed, our cupboards sealed, and our keys neatly docketed to hand over to our successors: our exits are mostly as impromptu as our entries; and it is only in books that we retire with flags flying, and all the honours of war.

The funeral, and a good deal of business kept Roger well engaged till early in October; his only correspondent besides business ones, being Lesley, who in her turn wrote him frequently.

Was he fool, or only a man, that gradually hope whispered how, since Ronny was entire-

ly out of her life, Lesley liked no one so much as himself, as Bob Heatherly knew to his sorrow?

Hope grows by what it feeds on, and before long, at every turn in Yelverton Castle, its master seemed to see the half shy, half proud, wholly lovely figure of Lesley moving about light as thistledown, and already in his stables he had selected the loose box about good enough for Miss Coquette.

And meanwhile Lesley was saying to Miss Coquette, her one real confidante in these days, since from Lady Cranstoun she only got reproaches, "You must be kind to me, Coquette, for I have no one but Dad and you." Yet no one ever dared to pity Lesley in these, the most awful days of her life.

I think they were bad days to a good many people just then: to Bob, who was realizing that to want a thing very badly is not to get it, and that the conqueror's baton is *not* carried in every lover's knapsack; to Lady Cranstoun, whose own play-days were over, and whose only interest in life lay in watching her friends' life-dreams and hating them to go wrong; to Lord Malincourt, who cursed himself for that hasty punishment of Lesley, which had proved punishment indeed to a good many people, including himself; to

Ronny, realizing his folly as he grew stronger every day, emancipating himself from that atmosphere of physic and nurses that had done more to quell his spirit than all his real bodily suffering; to Cynthia, meeting only kindness instead of love, tolerance taking the cold place of eager longing; to Lady Appuldurcombe, slowly pining under some real indisposition, and very severe heart-ache, and with a glorious, ripe autumn crowning all, and Nature crying to every one of them to have done with human emotions, and come out to lose themselves for awhile on her breast!—to learn from her patience and self-control, to bear like her all the pain, the cold, of suffering, knowing that the bitter hard winter will pass, and the time of rejoicing leaf, and flower, and song, come in due season! We think it is all for us, those fluttering green pennants, those magical scents and colours drawn out of her hidden bowl of sweets, but she is laughing at us all the while; it is for herself she breaks into exultant song; she has only pity for the poor human things who learn with such endless pain what she endures so easily!

But Lesley saw no spring beyond the winter of her discontent, and life stretched out before her, a barren road in endless bleak

perspective, upon which no gleam of life or colour came. Looking back upon the past weeks, it seemed to her that she had not really suffered at all, since Ronny still belonged to himself, and she could think of him and pray for him, without usurping the privileges of any woman, and if he had died, then he would have been *her* Ronny, loving her to the end.

But now the first thin end of the wedge was driven in, that might open his heart at last to Cynthia; she would be his wife, and it is so hard for a manly man to be a brute to his wife, even if he did not choose her for pure love; and Cynthia was very lovely, very womanly, and also very delectable, added Lesley's jealous, tortured heart. Probably they would be no unhappier than any other average husband and wife, and he would love his horses, and she would love him, and in time they would both forget that somewhere in the country a girl was growing into an old maid, because she had been foolish enough to fall in love with the first man who had ever scolded her, and denied her right to perfection.

Bob was very good to her in those days: when had he ever been anything else? And sometimes Lesley would look at him wistfully, wondering what it was he just missed, why

he had not been able to make her love him when there was no rival in the field, for they might have been very happy together in jog-trot fashion, their tastes being identical, and if she had lived and died without her heart once waking up, well, so much the better, than to waken to abiding ache and sorrow.

Ronny Kilmurry's name was seldom mentioned between them, though they often walked and talked together in those rimy October mornings when the joy of living is stronger in us than at any other time of year, and the conflagration of the woods has begun in good earnest, kindling them to fiercer loveliness each day.

The weather was glorious, and she came out with the luncheon most days to her father and Bob, who shot regularly together, now all the other men had left, and if at first she missed Roger, Bob was insensibly taking more than his place, now that he had got so firm the grip of himself he might be trusted to treat her as a good comrade, not an unwilling girl he meant to coerce into marrying him.

For Bob, taking counsel with himself, looked straight ahead, seeing the lines of his life very distinctly, and Lesley did not walk within those lines, for he read her heart by

his own, and as he knew there could be no second Lesley to him in life, so there would never be any second Ronny to her, yet the future did not daunt him, and he by no means felt the despair that her face indexed. She would be his neighbour, they would meet constantly; this dear, sweet friendship growing up between them would in time be almost as satisfying as love—almost! and then Bob would groan, and struggle with himself, and come out of that fight with only one resolve clear before him—that he must not think of himself, but help her to bear it, strain every nerve to bring some patches of sunshine across her withered life, yet.

She had no brother—well, he would try to be one to her, and a brother can do lots of little things to make a girl happier; he can rouse and take her out of herself, keep her going, and the hunting season was not so far off; once get Lesley into the saddle five days a week, and her spirits were bound to improve, and the colour would return to those wan cheeks that so constantly gave him a pang.

He got his reward one day when she said to him, "Bob, I used to like to be with Roger best, because he did not love me as well as you do, and I had not treated him so ill. Don't shake

your head; and perhaps if I had not been sent to town, I should have gone on flirting, and being a cruel wretch to the end. I wanted discipline, Bob, if ever a girl did, and I've got it!"

"Poor little girl!" said Bob, sadly.

"But now I like you better than any one in the whole world, save Dad, and Lady Cranstoun, and one other person, and you are the greatest help and comfort to me I have got. And we will always be friends now, Bob, for ever and ever and ever."

As he kissed her little hand, the tears sprang into her blue eyes—she had made him suffer so much, and she knew how gladly he would have borne all her pain for her if he could, though his own was no light burden.

"Oh! Bob," she said wistfully, then turned away; but he knew what she meant, and that there was not, never could be, any reply. And that "almost" stuck in his thoughts by night and day.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

And to Lesley, the day before Yelverton was expected back at Malincourt, came a letter, written in Mrs. Crockett's laborious hand which had never kept pace with her brain, which ran as follows:—

Appuldurcombe House, Park Lane,
"October 10, 1894.

"Honoured Miss,

"My lady is very ill—though she keeps it from Mr. Ronny, and cries in her sleep, and the Curse lies on her mind as she called down upon you, and she is well aware now she done you wrong, and if I may make so bold as to say so, Honoured Miss, a sight of you, and a kind word would save her a bad illness. I write this quite unbeknown, but though my Lady's too proud to say it, or ever own she was in the wrong, flowers in May wouldn't be as welcome as you'd be to her now. She seems to see as how the (here 'mistake' was partly rubbed out) engagement ain't for Mr. Ronny's happiness—and I hope, Honoured Miss, yours as we have all heard on, may be just as

happy as can be. Honoured Miss, will you please accept me and Mr. Charville's humble respects.

"Your obedient Servant,
"SARAH CROCKETT."

Lesley read this letter carefully over, not once, but many times, before she took it to her father.

Was there any plot among the old servants to bring her face to face with Ronny? Did they dislike Cynthia, or was Cynthia in Lady Appuldurcombe's bad books, as once she herself had been?

"Dad," she said, when he had read the letter, "what does it mean?"

"It means that Jane Appuldurcombe is a fool, and her folly has come back to roost," he said angrily, for he had never forgiven that cruel letter about his girl, and never would. "She did not think you good enough for her precious son Ronny—and now she doesn't think another woman good enough—and that's all about it," he added, with a man's masculine summing up of details.

"Yes," said Lesley, remembering Aunt Jane's stolen visit to kiss Ronny in his sleep that early morning, and of the look on her face, "but it's a hard thing to bring up your

child to make some one else happy—and that's just how she feels. You see he is quite old—at least thirty-two—and the others have all married, and he hasn't."

"So she gets a fit of the megrims," said Lord Malincourt, dryly. "Well," he added, "of course, if you mean to run away again, I can't stop you."

"No," said Lesley, quite gravely. No one on earth would stop her, once she had made up her mind. "But if she died, and I hadn't forgiven her, it would worry me to the end of my days."

"Oh," cried Lord Malincourt, impatiently, "you are all in the same boat. Here is a letter from the lawyers, saying I must go up, if only for a few hours, to swear my evidence;" and he quoted a case shortly coming on, in which just then he was involved, and of the deepest interest to Masters of Foxhounds.

"Very well," said Lesley, "we can go up together by the early train, and I shall do some shopping after going to Aunt Jane for an hour. We can catch the five o'clock back, and shall still get home in time for dinner at nine with Roger."

Lord Malincourt chipped an egg with a fierceness that suggested punching some one's head, probably Ronny's, and for once

displayed such real signs of temper that Lesley hastily beat a retreat to Bob, whom she saw at some distance crossing the park from Heather Court.

So it would always be, he thought, as with joy he saw her coming to meet him, dear young maid changing gradually into dear old maid, and he growing into a comfortable old bachelor, and coming over most days to shoot or hunt, but always to talk to her.

"What is it?" he said, when she had tucked into her waist-belt the knot of autumn wild flowers—all yellow, of course, for man may mix his colours in gardening as he pleases, Nature never—he had gathered on his way.

"How do you know?" she said swiftly.

"Don't I know every shade of your face? And there are at least a thousand. You are alive today, dear, not a mere doll whose wires are in admirable working order, but still a doll."

Yes. She was almost dancing as she stood opposite him under the yellowed tree, all the spontaneity of youth miraculously restored in her, ay, and its beauty.

"I am going to town tomorrow to Aunt Appuldurcombe, who is very ill."

Her face shadowed a little, not much, and he was keen to note the hard-heartedness of

the attempt.

"And you will see—him?"

"Most unlikely. And what if I do?" She could not keep the intense longing out of her voice. "He is Cynthia's, not mine."

"Poor Cynthia!" said Bob with real bitterness, probably what he really meant was, "poor Bob!"

"You think I am going, then, to see *him*—to take him away from her?" cried Lesley, indignantly. "If Ronny were well enough to go down on his knees to me here, this moment, I would not marry him now!"

"Oh yes, you would, Lesley," said Bob; "and do you think I would not marry *you*, if you gave me a chance? Love takes no 'yes' or 'no'; what it finds, it keeps."

"Oh!" cried Lesley, "if you talk like that, I will not go; and it will be on your conscience if a poor lady dies, because I was a moral coward, and simply afraid to look realities in the face."

"Go, then," said Bob, with energy; "and if it hurts you horribly, my poor little girl—" he stopped abruptly, and, for a moment, it flashed through Lesley's mind that a wise woman would have preferred this tender, manly fellow to the plighted lover of any other woman whatsoever. But why, oh! why,

did she see his intense lovableness too late?

She hit the real beauty of his character, the capacity for love stripped of passion, which is a man's Victoria Cross of honour, given by what he loves, when she said,

"Oh, Bob, if you men only knew how we love a man who can be just a *woman* to us sometimes!"

But Bob was almost past his strength, and while he bade her go, felt that "almost" plucking at his heart, taunting his manhood, crying out passionately and greedily for its own.

"I shall not answer the letter, and no one will know I am coming," said Lesley, joyfully, as they turned back towards the house. "Probably he will not be up. We arrive in town before luncheon that Dad may get his business through with the lawyers; and the day after tomorrow this time, I shall have nothing to tell you, but that I have been blessed by Aunt Appuldurcombe and forgiven!"

"And I hope," said Bob, steadfastly, "that you will have much more to tell me than that. If once you come face to face——

Lesley trembled.

"We must not, we *dare* not!" she cried wildly. "One cannot lay a sacrifice upon an altar, then snatch it back; it is breaking faith

with God. I will not go if you think that."

The bubbling happiness, the spring had gone out of her; it was a listless, hopeless Lesley upon whom Bob, his own face suddenly grown white and set, looked searchingly down.

"Go," he said, and his voice sounded harshly in his own ears, like the knell of love, of fortune, of all he held most dear on earth. "Lady Appuldurcombe is ill and wants you; you must not run the risk of self-reproaches afterwards."

He saw the frolic come back to her step, the light to her eyes, and, just before they reached the house, he begged from her one of the flowers he had given her, and that she would pin it in his coat—for once.

Lord Malincourt came out during the operation, and his brow, so seldom clouded, cleared up by magic.

"After all," he said to himself, "if only it should be Bob after all!" for Bob was the only man he had ever known whom he would have liked for his own flesh-and-blood son, and probably no better judge of what a man should, and should not be, ever lived than Lord Malincourt.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Ronny had not seen his mother for two days, but was put off by so many messages—all cheerful—that he did not realize anything serious, though, perhaps, had the old close bond been between them, he would not have taken her absence so quietly. And just now he was full of the new, keen delight of being able to walk a few steps, leaning on one person's arm or another—usually Charville's, in preference to Cynthia's, as she only too quickly perceived.

The charm between them was quite broken now; they no longer spoke of Lesley, and with returning energy, Ronny drifted every hour further from his future wife. He was always kind—oh! that deadly kindness, which passion never knew!—and he would marry her, and be good to her, when he happened to be at home, and his heart would be Lesley's to the day of his death.

He had insisted on rising early that morning, so when Lesley, invited by Lady Appuldurcombe's servants, as Lord Malincourt an-

grily told himself, came to the door of his half-sister's house, Charville, scarcely believing his eyes, ushered her joyfully up into the big saloon, and throwing the double doors wide open, disclosed Ronny, standing in the middle of the room, one arm round Cynthia's shoulders, and in his left hand a stick, upon which he leaned heavily.

Lesley walked forward slowly, blindly, as a freezing blind man draws instinctively to the warmth that he feels but cannot see—even so Ronny drew her, her soul, her body, till the two had come face to face, and, broken-hearted, looked upon each other, humbly too, as those who, not denying their love, know their yearning to be in vain .... then Lesley pulled herself together, and, white to the lips, but with all the pride of her race, turned away.

But Cynthia caught and held her back, with Ronny's clasp still about her shoulders, with one look at either transfigured face, she *knew* —as well might one deny God's sunlight in heaven as such love as this! Moaning, she covered her eyes, the pallid puppet-play of her own and Ronny's loves, fallen to bits in sawdust before her, seeing only two souls' happiness against hers, against one—Lesley's sacrifice had been made in vain, and now

her own turn had come, should she flinch from it?

"You gave him up to me, Lesley," she said, and took Ronny's arm from her shoulders, and twined it round the girl's neck, so much more slender than her own; "and I give him back to you." . . .

I think that in that moment of pure ecstasy they saw only one another—did not know when Cynthia crept away—the world stood still, and only they two were in it, as folding both arms about his beloved, Ronny strained her to his breast, and kissed her, kissed her as a man can but once in his life, when having lost, and half died for his love, he wakens from his long night of anguish to find her heart beating against his own.

And Lesley took his gaunt face in her hands and kissed him, brow, and lips, and chin, no niggard in her bounty, drinking deep of the one supreme joy that life cannot deny us, and perhaps they might be standing there till this moment, lost in one another, had not Charville, keeping discreetly behind the door he opened by inches, announced that her ladyship was worrying for Miss Lesley, and would Mr. Ronny please to come too?

When Ronny had put her hat quite straight, then made it very crooked again,

and dusted a speck or two of dust from her blue linen gown with its bands of white embroidery, he remembered Cynthia, and asked a little sternly—though the sternness was not for Lesley—what she had meant by that speech about taking and giving back?

"We both, sir," said Lesley, making him an audacious curtsey, "had the bad taste to fall in love with you, and we drew lots, and you fell to Cynthia. Oh, poor, poor Cynthia, and now she has behaved splendidly, and given you back to me!"

"Oh, I *say!*" cried Ronny, in great amazement; "it seems a chap can't belong to himself at all—so *that* was why you ran away? And I never will forgive Cynthia—never. Oh, my dear Sweet Lips, to think we have wasted two whole months!" And then, that there might be no further waste of time, he stopped his slow progress down the room to kiss her again and again. "Poor Roger!" he said, in a luxury of pity, "what will *he* say? When I heard of your engagement to him——"

"He is all right," said Lesley, hard-heartedly. "*Don't* our two heads make a nice contrast?" she cried out suddenly as they came to a mirror, and leaning their cheeks together, looked in each other's eyes; yet, even as she looked, a strange thing happened, for she

saw, not Ronny, but Bob, standing alone under the trees, death in his face, and distinctly heard his voice say—

"*Go.*"

"What is it?" cried Ronny, alarmed, and holding her fast.

"It's Bob, Ronny. Oh, I don't think any woman was ever so lucky in her lovers as I am! It's Bob's doing I am here now!"

"Indeed. You didn't want to come, then?"

"Yes—but there was Cynthia. Poor Cynthia!"

"Wicked Cynthia, *I* call her," said Ronny, angrily. "Oh, Lord! and the way she used to talk about you—it was her own passport to my favour! Perhaps, after all, you would rather have stayed with Bob?"

"No. But, Ronny,"—she took his face in both her hands, and looked at him very sweetly and earnestly—"you are only a man, you know, after all!"

"Yes, dear?"

"And you can't help it—I mean you will be tiresome and aggravating sometimes; but then, so shall I, Ronny, so shall I."

"All right. At present I only feel it's an amazing thing, the enormous potentialities for happiness two persons may have in themselves—nothing and nobody outside wanted,

but just themselves! And I try to be sorry for Bob, and you're very sorry for Cynthia; but I can only feel one thing—that I've got *you*."

"Ronny," she said, "your mother is impatient—we must go up. And after that, you'll come to Malincourt, and I'll nurse you up, and you shall be as strong as ever you were, in three months!"

Charville overheard the last words as, with a subordinate, he waited with the invalid chair to carry Ronny upstairs; and he beamed upon the insensately happy pair when they came out, his aristocratic looks striking Lesley keenly after a somewhat lengthened course of "Mr. Hutt."

"Just for today, Charville," she said, laughing, and waving her little hand; "but we're going to do away with all these things presently!"

Decency forbade Ronny's taking her hand as she frolicked up the stairs beside him, all her buoyant airs and graces miraculously restored; but outside his mother's door, he found her support absolutely necessary. So they entered, with a good deal of help from one another, and Jane Appuldurcombe, pale and wasted, seeing how things were at a glance, held out her arms as they drew near, and, without a word, but many tears, kissed

them both passionately.

"I have been a very wicked woman, my dear," she said—her elegance, like her apartment, quite unimpaired by her remorse and illness—when Ronny had been made comfortable in an easy-chair, dosed with wine, and generally taken care of. "I think if you had not come—and made it up—I should have died. And I think Ronny would have died too."

Presently mother and son were left alone together, for Lesley, after kissing Ronny openly and shamelessly, had stolen away.

"She has gone to Cynthia," said Lady Appuldurcombe, softly.

"But, thank God,' said Ronny, "she is coming back to *me!*"

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